HOWARDS END

E. M. FORSTER

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Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879, attended Tonbridge School as a day boy, and went on to King's College, Cambridge, in 1897. With King's he had a lifelong connection and was elected to an Honorary Fellowship in 1946. He wrote six novels, four of which appeared before World War I: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), and *Howards End* (1910). An interval of fourteen years elapsed before he published *A Passage to India* (1924). It won both the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. *Maurice* was finished in 1914 but not published until 1971, after Forster's death. Forster also published two volumes of short stories; two collections of essays; *Aspects of the Novel*, a critical work; *The Hill of Devi*, a fascinating record of two visits Forster made to the Indian state of Dewas Senior; two biographies; two books about Alexandria (where he worked for the Red Cross during World War I); and, with Eric Crozier, the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*. He died in June 1970.

David Lodge is the author of many acclaimed novels, including *The British Museum Is Falling Down, Paradise News, Therapy, Nice Work*, and *Small World*. Among his critical works are *The Practice of Writing* and *The Art of Fiction*. He is Honorary Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Birmingham, where he taught from 1960 to 1987.

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INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
DAVID LODGE

'*Only connect …*'

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that *Howards End* is a classic of twentieth-century literature. Since Lionel Trilling's seminal *E. M. Forster: A Study* (1943), which argued persuasively for Forster's canonical status and focused special attention on *Howards End*, it has been required reading for any serious student of the modern English novel. It has been exhaustively discussed and analysed in innumerable periodical articles and books. The details of its genesis, composition and reception have been painstakingly recuperated, and the author's manuscript pored over for evidence of changes of authorial intention. And yet very few of the critics and scholars who have devoted so much time and attention to *Howards End* have concurred with Trilling's judgement that it is Forster's masterpiece. Most would award that accolade to *A Passage to India* (1924). Most have expressed dissatisfaction with the earlier novel, for a variety of reasons: its design is excessively schematic, its plot relies on improbable coincidences, the behaviour and motivation of the main characters are sometimes implausible, and its verbal style is prone to sudden, and not always happy, shifts of tone.

How can we explain or resolve the paradox, of a novel apparently so deeply flawed and yet so inexhaustibly fascinating to academic critics? There are, I suggest, two reasons. Firstly, the good things in *Howards End* are very good indeed. Secondly, even when it does not fully convince as fiction, it is always intelligently engaged with issues of the deepest interest and concern to the kind of people who teach the humanities in universities—and to the much larger number of people whose values and beliefs have been largely formed by such an education. *Howards End* fingers with unparalleled precision a sensitive spot in the consciousness, or conscience, of the liberal literary intelligentsia. In one of the best recent essays on *Howards End*, Daniel Born has claimed that it provides 'the most comprehensive picture of liberal guilt in this century.'[1] The issue it addresses, and dramatises in an absorbing human story, is whether culture—in the large sense defined by Matthew Arnold as the pursuit of 'a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society'[2]—is an attainable ideal. If culture at the personal level depends ultimately on the possession of money (and Forster insists that it does), can it be shared equally in society? And what stance should the advocates of culture adopt towards those who make money, and towards those who have little or none?

Of course, these questions do not present themselves in quite the same terms at the beginning of the twenty-first century as they did ninety years ago. For Forster's heroine, Margaret Schlegel, the possibility of bad faith arises when people of her type and class refuse to recognize that their way of life, with its priorities, attitudes and values, depends on the possession of private incomes, inherited and invested. '"You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands," she says to her aunt. "It is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence…. I stand each year upon six hundred pounds, and Helen upon the same…. And all our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders"' (pp. 51–52). One reason she respects the Wilcoxes is that they work hard for their money; another is that the kind of work they do maintains the system that guarantees the Schlegels' incomes. Unfortunately, that system also makes wage slaves out of people like Leonard Bast. Today there are fewer intellectuals living on unearned incomes, but most of us are enmeshed in capitalist economies, uncomfortably aware (or complacently unaware) that the quality of our lives depends ultimately upon economic structures which entail injustice and inequality on a global scale.

Like all authentic classics, then, *Howards End* is revealing of its own time and yet is of more than 'period' interest. The manners and morals of middle-class English society in the decade before the Great War are preserved in its pages like a collection of perfect fossils. Some features of this world have gone for ever: for example, the existence of a huge pool of cheap labour for domestic service; or the repressive and hypocritical sexual code which made pregnancy outside marriage the ultimate disgrace for a respectable woman. But in other respects, *Howards End* seems surprisingly relevant to our own contemporary concerns, especially in the debate it stages between the values of the liberal intelligentsia and those of the capitalist bourgeoisie. The Schlegels belong to the Edwardian equivalent of what an inspired anonymous British journalist in the 1980s called 'the chattering classes', while the Wilcoxes are Thatcherites *avant la lettre*. When Henry Wilcox says to Margaret, 'You can take it from me that there is no Social Question—except for a few journalists who try and get a living out of the phrase,' he anticipates Mrs Thatcher's notorious assertion (to a journalist) that 'There is no such thing as Society.' In Margaret's recognition of the contribution the Wilcoxes of this world make to civilization, and her effort to 'connect' the Schlegels' values with theirs (which her sister, Helen, sees as a betrayal), she anticipates the conversion of moderate leftwing opinion to market-oriented economic policies in the last two decades. Richard Rorty has observed, in a passage that seems to recapitulate the ideological quandary in which Forster's heroine finds herself, 'We should be more willing than we are to celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far, while regretting that it is irrelevant to most of the problems of most of the population of the planet.'[3] One might query the 'irrelevance', but since the collapse of Communism it has become harder to deny Rorty's assertion that 'there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory.'[4] Forster's yearning to make such a connection, however, is still an aspiration with which many readers will identify.

Howards End (1910) was Forster's fourth published novel, and the one which firmly established his reputation among his contemporaries as an important writer. He was born in 1879, the only child of an architect after whom he was named Edward Morgan Forster. His father died the following year and Forster was brought up by his mother, assisted by numerous female relatives. He later recalled the ambience of his childhood as 'a haze of elderly ladies'.[5] Notable among these was his great-aunt, Marianne Thornton, whose father had been a leading member of the so-called 'Clapham Sect', an influential group of high-minded evangelical Anglicans in the first decades of the century. She left him eight thousand pounds in trust on her death in 1887, enough to assure him of a modestly comfortable private income in adult life. But the most intense and important emotional tie in his childhood, and for long afterwards, was with his widowed mother, who never remarried. In psychoanalytical terms it was a classic scenario for the development of a homosexual temperament.

The happiest years of Forster's childhood were those between 1883 and 1893, when he lived with his mother at 'Rooksnest', a house in the country near Stevenage in Hertfordshire, about twenty-five miles north of London, that was to be the model for 'Howards End'. Later they moved to Tonbridge, in Kent, where Forster attended Tonbridge School. In spite of being protected from the full rigours of a British public school by virtue of being a day pupil rather than a boarder, Forster was deeply miserable at this establishment. His gentle, shy, feminized personality was at odds with the aggressively masculine, athletic and imperialistic ethos of the school (of which the Wilcoxes might have been products).

In 1897, however, Forster went up to King's College at Cambridge to read classics, and was happy once more. He came under the influence, indirect rather than direct, of the philosopher G. E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* (1903) argued that affectionate personal relations and the contemplation of beauty are the supremely good states of mind. This teaching was enthusiastically adopted by some of the cleverest young men in Cambridge, such as Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes, who in due course carried it to London, where, stripped of Moore's own austere moral code, it became the hedonistic philosophy of the Bloomsbury Group of writers and artists (including Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, and Roger Fry) with which Forster was loosely associated without ever fully belonging to it.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of Cambridge on Forster's personal and intellectual development. He stayed on for a fourth year of study after graduating, and frequently revisited the place. In later life he was made a Fellow of King's College and resided there till his death in 1970. As a young man he found in Cambridge a kind of ideal society—privileged but not ostentatiously affluent, dedicated to the pursuit of truth and beauty, steeped in tradition, and housed in beautiful ancient buildings. It was at that time an almost exclusively male society, in which intense friendships could and did develop. It was at Cambridge that Forster recognized his homosexual orientation, though some years passed before he experienced his first physical relationship.

After graduating Forster travelled extensively in Italy (with his mother as companion) and later took a cruise to Greece, acquiring experience of the English abroad that he would use to good effect in his early novels. On his return to England he began to write for the *Independent Review*, a new journal founded by a group of his friends and aimed at the liberal intelligentsia. It published his first short story, 'The Story of a Panic', in 1904. In the following year he published his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. This and his third novel, *A Room with a View* (1908), are delightful social comedies in the tradition of Jane Austen. In both, the most sympathetic characters are liberated from their repressed and repressive English middle-class background by exposure to different cultures, climates and classes. Forster's second novel, *The Longest Journey*, was more 'serious', and revealed more of his own inner life, but has generally been regarded as the least successful of the novels he published in his lifetime.

The first seed of *Howards End* seems to have been planted in Forster's consciousness by a return in the summer of 1906 to his old haunts near Stevenage. He called at Highfield, a house owned by a wealthy stockbroker called Poston, where he and his mother had been frequent visitors in his youth. Mr Poston had lost his wife and recently married a new one, whom Forster found 'pretty, pleasant and clever' but incongruously matched with her philistine and boastful husband. 'Like all such he talks incessantly', Forster reported to his mother in a letter. 'The rooms are full of Fra Angelicos, etc., and [Poston] shows them off just as he used to show off his fields, though in this case he cannot always recollect the names…. I cannot think that such an unusually charming person can love him deeply.'[6] Here we seem to recognize the unsuspecting models for Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox. But it was two years before he sketched the first outline of *Howards End*:

> Idea for another novel shaping, and may do well to write it down. In a prelude Helen goes to stop with the Wilcoxes, gets engaged to the son and breaks it off immediately, for her instinct sees the spiritual cleavage between the families. Mrs Wilcox dies, and some years later Margaret gets engaged to the widower, a man impeccable publicly. They are accosted by a prostitute. M. because she understands and is great, marries him. The wrong thing to do. He, because he is little, cannot bear to be understood, and goes to the bad. He is frank, kind and attractive. But he dreads ideas.[7]

Interestingly absent from this synopsis is any hint of the reconciliation between Margaret and Henry Wilcox, and between the values they respectively represent, which is implied by the conclusion of the finished novel, and signalled by its epigraph, 'Only connect'. Forster evidently discovered this theme in the process of writing the novel, which occupied him until well into 1910. It was published in October of that year.

Forster's involvement with the *Independent Review* had focused his attention on social, political and economic questions. One of the contributing members of the editorial board of this journal was C. F. G. Masterman, Fellow

of Christ's College, Cambridge, who became a Liberal Member of Parliament in 1906 and later served in government as a minister. In 1902 he enterprisingly rented a tenement flat in south London, and wrote a book of amateur sociology entitled *From the Abyss: Of Its Inhabitants, by One of Them*. (A year later Jack London published a similar account of his experiences in London's East End, *The People of the Abyss*.) 'The abyss' is a phrase used in connection with Leonard Bast in *Howards End*: 'The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more' (p. 38). The fear of falling into poverty through misfortune is the fate worse than death that haunts the genteel mind in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 'The abyss' was the Victorian and Edwardian equivalent of what we call the Underclass, but before the institution of state welfare it was a bottomless pit of misery and degradation—hence the lurid and infernal name. We can be confident that Forster had read this book of Masterman's. Born remarks that his description of Leonard's and Jacky's flat in chapter VI of *Howards End* 'seems lifted straight out of *From the Abyss*.'[8] Interestingly, when asked later in life if he had ever written about a situation of which he had no personal experience Forster cited 'the home-life of Leonard and Jacky in *Howards End*.'[9]

In 1909, when Forster was writing his novel, Masterman contributed a series of articles to the *Independent Review* which he published as a book in the following year, entitled *The Condition of England*. In the course of it he quoted extensively from H. G. Wells's socio-economic meditations on the state of Edwardian England in his novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909), which Masterman had read in proof.[10] According to P. N. Furbank, Forster intended *Howards End* 'to be his "condition-of-England novel" in the spirit of Wells and Galsworthy—not that he so much admired them, but, so he thought, perhaps he could do better.'[11] Whether he read *Tono-Bungay* or not, Forster would certainly have read Masterman's *The Condition of England* as it appeared in serial form, and was evidently influenced by it; but the phrase itself had a much older provenance. It first became current in the 1840s, the 'Hungry Forties' as they were called, a decade of great poverty, suffering and social unrest. 'The condition of England question,' Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1843, '… is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world.'[12] In his novel *Coningsby* (1844), Benjamin Disraeli refers to 'that Condition of England Question, of which our generation hears so much.'[13] The question was explored in other novels, including Disraeli's own *Sybil* (1845), Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). Most of these novels dealt with the gap between the rich and the poor, the 'two nations' of *Sybil*, and the problem of reconciling the interests and rights of capital and labour. In *The Condition of England* and *Howards End*, the emphasis falls somewhat differently. There are still two nations of haves and have-nots in Edwardian England, but there is also deprivation of a spiritual, cultural and psychological kind which cuts across class divisions. By this date, the brutal, life-threatening poverty which the Victorian writers depicted had been, if not abolished, considerably reduced, as Masterman observes:

> A proportion of the population is raised well above the privations of poverty larger than ever before in history…. It is rather in the region of the spirit that the doubts are still disturbing…. Is the twentieth century to advocate a scheme of life which will itself provide a consolation in the loss of the older faiths, and redeem mankind from a mere animal struggle for the apparatus of material pleasure?[14]

This is a question Forster addresses in *Howards End*, sometimes through the reflections and observations of his heroine, Margaret Schlegel, sometimes in his own authorial voice, and sometimes in a fusion of the two. There is a quasi-religious, certainly a mystical strain in this level of the text which is worth examining.

Forster described himself as 'a child of unbelief',[15] meaning that, to his generation of intellectuals, atheism and agnosticism came very easily, with none of the traumas suffered by their Victorian predecessors over the loss of Christian faith. Churchgoing and collective prayer were mainly social rituals in his childhood and youth; as an undergraduate at Cambridge he soon ceased to pretend that he was a believing Christian. But, as Frederick Crews has pointed out, Forster had 'a thwarted fascination with the Absolute', a 'theological preoccupation without a theology to support it.'[16] Though he found Christianity unappealing, he was not a materialist, and recoiled from the reductively scientific account of human nature. In *Howards End*, sometimes through the authorial voice, and sometimes using the Schlegel sisters as mouthpieces, he frequently states the claim of the Unseen against the Seen. He is fond of the words 'soul' and 'eternity'. His heroine, Margaret, seems not to be a believing Christian, or to subscribe to any other religious faith, but she is confident of her own immortality (p. 284). The railway station of King's Cross suggests infinity to her (p. 10). Her views on the relationship between sexual desire and human love are shared by the author:

> She knew that out of Nature's device we have built a magic that will win us immortality. Far more mysterious than the call of sex to sex is the tenderness that we throw into that call…. We are evolving, in ways that Science cannot measure, to ends that Theology dare not contemplate. 'Men did produce one jewel,' the gods will say, and saying, will give us immortality. Margaret knew all this. (p. 205)

Neither Margaret nor Forster actually believe in the existence of these lower-case 'gods', of course—they are a rhetorical flourish, to give life to a rather vague abstract idea. But Forster was always more sympathetic towards paganism than towards Christianity. One of the reasons he found Italy and Greece so congenial was that you didn't have to scratch far beneath the surface Catholicism of Mediterranean culture to find the traces of ancient nature worship. The wych elm at Howards End, with the pigs' teeth embedded in its bark, points to the ancient pagan

past of the place, which is very much part of the house's symbolic significance.

Both Masterman and Forster were liberals whose deepest instincts were, in a non-political sense, conservative. Both deplored the environmental damage caused by 'progress', especially the increasing dominance of the motor car. Both regretted the loss of traditional rural customs, occupations and amenities caused by spreading urbanization and suburbanization. Underlying the vision of both men's books is what we may call a pastoral myth, which associates all that is most valuable in human life with the country and all that is most threatening and corrupting with the city, and maintains that what looks like material progress is actually a process of spiritual decline. As Raymond Williams pointed out in his book *The Country and the City* (1973), the most striking thing about these views is that they have been firmly believed by some people (especially literary people) in every age or generation as far back as you care to trace them (eventually you end up in the Golden Age of classical pastoral, or the Garden of Eden before the Fall). Things were always better in the past, before they were damaged or destroyed by the internal combustion engine, or the industrial revolution, or land enclosure, or the dissolution of the monasteries, or whatever…. To read *Howards End* in the 1990s is to recognize that many of Forster's strictures on the decline in the quality of modern life could have been written yesterday, except that the ruined England Forster describes despairingly is one we look back to today as comparatively unspoiled. For example: 'month by month the roads smelt more strongly of petrol, and were more difficult to cross, and human beings heard each other speak with greater difficulty, breathed less of the air, and saw less of the sky. Nature withdrew; the leaves were falling by midsummer; the sun shone through dirt with an admired obscurity' (p. 92).

There is no difficulty in establishing the 'meaning' of *Howards End*: the story is almost allegorical in design. The Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, are clever, cultured and idealistic. Their surname inevitably evokes Romantic literature and philosophy, by association with the famous German brothers Friederich and Wilhelm von Schlegel. The sisters are indeed half German in extraction and have an easy familiarity with Continental Europe. They have private incomes which allow them to pursue their interests in high culture and personal relations without having to work for their living. There are differences of temperament and attitude between them which remind us of other pairs of sisters in classic English fiction (Elinor and Marianne in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance; Dorothea and Celia Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*; and Ursula and Gudrun in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*). Margaret is more earnest, clear-sighted and selfless than the volatile, egocentric, impulsive Helen, and is consequently favoured by the author. But they agree on many fundamental principles and differ mainly about how to put these into practice. Their London ménage is essentially feminine, even feminist up to a point, and they enjoy a degree of independence unusual for unmarried women of the period, both their parents being dead and their younger brother, Tibby, signally lacking in virile characteristics.

The Wilcoxes in contrast belong to the prosperous commercial bourgeoisie. Henry Wilcox has lifted himself and his family to the top of their social class by his success as a businessman. He acquired the house, Howards End, through his wife's inheritance, but it does not satisfy his social ambitions, and throughout the story he is restlessly seeking some more pretentious abode. As a family the Wilcoxes are antithetical to the Schlegels: politically conservative, patriotic, insular (they have 'very little faith in the Continent' [p. 65]) but imperialist, patriarchal (both syllables of the name have strongly masculine connotations), work-oriented, philistine, materialistic, conventional in manners, addicted to motor cars and sports in their leisure time. Mrs Wilcox dutifully conforms to these values, though her heart seems to beat to a different tune.

The two families meet on holiday abroad. The sisters are invited to Howards End, but only Helen is able to go (there is a hint that Mrs Wilcox really wished to invite Margaret alone). Helen is at first impressed by the energy and self-confidence of the Wilcoxes, and charmed by Mrs Wilcox. She is physically attracted to the youngest Wilcox son, Paul, and imagines that she is in love. But she is quickly disillusioned, feeling 'that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness' (p. 22). This last phrase is one of several, like 'telegrams and anger', 'the Seen and the Unseen', 'the prose and the passion', which Forster uses frequently in the course of the novel as a kind of shorthand for its cultural and metaphysical themes. We might detect here the influence of Matthew Arnold, who had a similar knack of coining and repeating key phrases ('sweetness and light', 'Hebraism and Hellenism', 'culture and anarchy') in his social and literary criticism.

Helen's efforts to disentangle herself from her brief involvement with Paul, compromised by Aunt Juley's clumsy intervention, generate the excellent social comedy of the novel's opening sequence. It is Ruth Wilcox who provides the necessary calm and balm at the crucial moment. Though a loyal and obedient wife, she is not a Wilcox in spirit. Her Biblical given name suggests a woman who has married into a foreign tribe, and the fact that she dies quite soon in the story from a long-concealed illness suggests that she has in some sense been 'killed' by the marriage. But she is not a spiritual Schlegel either, being essentially conventional in her views and lacking intellectual curiosity. She is identified with her house, Howards End, and she embodies the pastoral myth referred to earlier. We first see her like a figure in an allegorical masque:

> She approached … trailing noiselessly over the lawn, and there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands. She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her…. High-born she might not be. But assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her. (p. 19)

It is a crucial passage, in which, as so often in this novel, the narrator's voice adopts a slightly archaic literary

diction ('bestow', assuredly', 'high-born') to give solemnity and weight to the sentiments expressed—and perhaps, the sceptical reader may sometimes think, to disguise their lack of philosophical foundations.

Another character essential to the thematic design of the novel, Leonard Bast, is introduced in another consummately managed piece of social comedy, when his umbrella is accidentally purloined by Helen at the symphony concert. Leonard is an office clerk. 'We are not concerned with the very poor,' says the narrator. 'They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician and the poet' (p. 38). This observation has irked many readers of *Howards End*, and indeed there is something objectionable about it. Like several authorial asides in the novel, it seems to be trying to 'have it both ways'—to be both ironically self-deprecating and at the same time flippantly patronising. The 'very poor' are simultaneously elevated into the realm of tragedy and reduced to the level of dull social statistics. In fact Forster had no direct knowledge of the very poor and would never have risked attempting to depict them in his fiction. But a white-collar worker like Leonard Bast, clinging to the bottom rung of the lower middle class by his finger tips, and struggling hopelessly to improve his lot and his mind, was for this novelist's purposes a more interesting example of the underprivileged in Edwardian England than, say, a factory worker, or a miner, or an agricultural worker such as Bast's grandparents were. The Bast family history epitomises what Masterman called 'the largest secular change of a thousand years: from the life of the fields to the life of the city. Nine out of ten families have migrated in three generations.'[17] The authorial voice of *Howards End* speculates that Leonard Bast would have been happier in the more static society of the past, when he would have had a settled place and role in society. As it is, he lacks the education, leisure and funds to fulfil his aspirations to high culture.

The eagerness of the Schlegel sisters to be nice to Bast, his bafflement by their skittish chatter and free and easy manners, the unbridgeable gap of experience, assumptions and economic status between him and them—all these things are captured and communicated by Forster with an exquisite lightness of touch and economy of means. The whole of chapter V indeed displays Forster's skill as a writer at his best: from the famous commentary on Beethoven's Fifth Symphony at the beginning, to its quiet, meditative conclusion, as the Schlegel sisters' drawing room darkens with the evening, and the talkative women fall silent at last and reflect uneasily on their brief, unsatisfactory encounter with Leonard Bast: 'It remained as a goblin footfall, as a hint that all is not well in the best of all possible worlds, and that beneath these superstructures of wealth and art there wanders an ill-fed boy, who has recovered his umbrella indeed, but who has left no address behind him, and no name' (p. 38).

In the next stage of the narrative, the Wilcoxes take one of the new flats overlooking the house occupied by the Schlegels, causing the latter some irritation and embarrassment. Margaret writes a discourteous letter to Mrs Wilcox, of which she is immediately ashamed (one is reminded of Emma Woodhouse's snub of Miss Bates in Jane Austen's *Emma*). Making up for her rudeness, Margaret befriends Ruth Wilcox, though ostensibly they have little in common. Ruth is about to show Margaret her beloved house, but the expedition is aborted by the return of her husband and son from a motoring holiday. Shortly afterwards, Ruth Wilcox dies, leaving a note expressing a wish that Margaret should inherit Howards End. The Wilcoxes decide to ignore it. Henry Wilcox begins to woo Margaret, and she accepts him, to the dismay of Helen. The sisters seek Henry's advice on improving Bast's situation, but the result is that he loses his job and is cast into the abyss. The outraged Helen seeks to embarrass Henry into making reparation, but her ill-conceived plan has far-reaching and fatal consequences. Henry's hypocrisy is exposed and Margaret's marriage jeopardised; Helen herself spends a night with Bast and becomes pregnant; Bast is chastised by Charles Wilcox and dies of heart failure; Charles is sent to prison; Henry, 'broken' by this misfortune, throws himself on Margaret's mercy (rather like Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*). At the end of the novel, Margaret and Henry are sharing Howards End with Helen and her child, who will inherit it. Thus Ruth Wilcox's wish is fulfilled, and the possible reconciliation of the divided classes, ideologies and interests displayed in the story is suggested in the hopeful figure of the child and the traditional seasonal activity of hay making, both symbolic of fertility and renewal. This pastoral idyll, of course, hardly constitutes a viable solution for post-industrial society at large, as Forster perhaps acknowledges in the ominous reference to the 'red rust' of housing development only eight meadows distant from Howards End (p. 289). The novel offers only a narrative solution, not a political one, to the questions it raises: How can capitalism be humanised? How can the good life be honourably pursued in a world of social inequality? Henry Wilcox is a broken, not a changed man at the end of the story. The Schlegel sisters' efforts to improve Leonard Bast's quality of life fail comprehensively. Helen's offers, first of her body, and then of her fortune, to the young man, are exposed as quixotic, impracticable gestures which lead to his untimely death, while Margaret's commitment to Henry Wilcox entails, as Daniel Born observes, a distinctly cool disengagement from Bast's plight.[18] If his child has a more hopeful future, it is as a member of the property-owning bourgeoisie.

Forster set himself a difficult task: to tell a convincing story of personal relationships in which every character and every action also carries a heavy freight of representative significance and contributes to the thematic design. Opinions differ about how far he succeeded. Personally I am not bothered by his reliance on coincidence at several crucial points in the story (e.g., Jacky's connection with Henry Wilcox, and Leonard Bast's untimely appearance at Howards End). These events are a legitimate exercise of a novelist's licence, and Forster handles them deftly. Helen's brief sexual relationship with Leonard Bast, which seemed gratuitously shocking to some contemporary readers, and excited the derision of others, like Katherine Mansfield,[19] is not inconsistent with her character, though it can be seen as a displaced and disguised version of a more plausible homosexual encounter between two men from different classes.

The main stumbling-block for many readers is Margaret's motivation in marrying Henry Wilcox. We see clearly what this signifies on the thematic level of the text: an effort to 'connect' the wealth-creating energy of the Wilcoxes with the humanising idealism of the Schlegels. It arises out of Margaret's (and Forster's) conviction that liberal intellectuals are in bad faith in despising and dissociating themselves from the capitalist economic system which supports their life style; and in failing to recognize the industry, dedication and enterprise of those who keep the system going. 'More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it,' says Margaret (p. 149). There is nothing inherently improbable or inconsistent about this as an attitude. The problem is that Margaret is required by the plot to act it out by marrying Henry Wilcox, and nothing he says or does persuades us that she would do so. The best that can be said for him is that he is a kind and efficient host on social occasions, but he values his friends as friends hardly at all. We never see him exhibit his skills as a man of business—the only piece of professional advice he gives turns out to be wrong. Intellectually he is prejudiced, arrogant and conformist. He never engages in real debate with Margaret, and never changes his opinions about anything. He is a sexual hypocrite, who cannot see that his affair with Jacky was an offence against Ruth Wilcox, to whom he was married at the time, not against Margaret. One must agree with F. R. Leavis's magisterial verdict: 'Nothing in the exhibition of Margaret's or Henry Wilcox's character makes the marriage credible or acceptable.'[20] For this strand of the novel to work, it would have been necessary to present some new and more favourable view of Henry to the reader, but instead Forster continues to make him condemn himself by every word and action.

Sexual attraction might have provided the required motivation—and seems to do so, at first: Margaret's enjoyment of the novel experience of being wooed is plausible. But Henry proves to be a clumsy lover in courtship, snatching a wordless kiss and leaving Margaret upset and dissatisfied: '[T]he incident displeased her…. Nothing in their previous conversation had heralded it, and, worse still, no tenderness had ensued … he had hurried away as if ashamed' (p. 157). As to their sexual life after marriage, Forster was prevented both by the reticence of the age and by his own ignorance of heterosexual love from giving us any direct account of that, but there isn't any indirect hint, either, of a sexual awakening or fulfilment on Margaret's part. Her thoughts on the subject all emphasise the sublimation of sexual desire in human love; and when Miss Avery shows her the nursery at Howards End, with Tibby's bassinet in place, as if awaiting a baby, Margaret turns away 'without speaking' (p. 233), suggesting that she does not expect, for one reason or another, to have a child herself.

E. M. Forster has always occupied a problematic position in the literary history of the twentieth century. He is generally recognized as a major modern novelist, with a place in the same pantheon as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. But even the admiring Trilling observed, shrewdly, that 'he is sometimes irritating in his refusal to be great'[21]—something those other writers consistently strove to be; and in form his work has little in common with theirs, with the partial exception of D. H. Lawrence. The kind of fiction we call modernist, or sometimes symbolist, exemplified by those writers, reacted strongly against the form of the nineteenth-century novel, in which, typically, a complex plot is narrated and commented on by an omniscient authorial voice. Instead it sought to represent the world as experienced in the individual consciousness or unconscious, using limited viewpoints, or unreliable narrators, and frequent time shifts which disrupt the temporal logic of cause and effect. Narrative cohesion is to a large extent replaced by symbolic patterning and intertextual allusion in these often difficult and ambiguous works. Forster, however, in many ways perpetuated the nineteenth-century tradition. He tells an entertaining, well-made story in chronological order, frequently intrudes to comment on the action in his authorial voice, and switches the narrative point of view freely from one character to another. But his authorial intrusions are knowingly self-conscious, sometimes calling attention to their own artificiality in metafictional asides. For example:

> To Margaret—I hope that it will not set the reader against her—the station of King's Cross had always suggested infinity…. Those two great arches, colourless, indifferent, shouldering between them an unlovely clock, were fit portals for some eternal adventure…. If you think this is ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it. (pp. 10–11)

Furthermore, Forster grafted on to the form of the well-made traditional novel a subtle use of symbolic patterning, the repetition-with-variation of resonant phrases and images, that he himself called, in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), 'pattern and rhythm'.[22] Another critic has called this technique 'spatial form', and identified it as a key characteristic of modernist literature.[23] The combination of traditional and modern elements in Forster's fictional technique is epitomised by his naming, as the novelists from whom he had learned most, Jane Austen and Marcel Proust.[24] The first name is no surprise; the second perhaps is, until we read what Forster has to say about the quasi-musical structure of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in *Aspects of the Novel*.

As an example of Forster's fictional technique in *Howards End* we might look at chapter XI, about Mrs Wilcox's funeral and its aftermath. It begins with an authorial descriptive passage. 'The funeral was over. The carriages had rolled away through the soft mud, and only the poor remained' (p. 75). We could be reading George Eliot—or Thomas Hardy, as the narrator goes on to describe the reactions of the local country people, and then adopts the point of view of one of them, a woodcutter pollarding the elms overlooking the churchyard. The woodcutter's thoughts convey the traditional, semi-pagan, in-tune-with-nature response to death, which soon gives way to a renewed commitment to life, as he goes off to 'mate', stealing a chrysanthemum from the graveside for his girl. Then follows an authorial description of the deserted churchyard at night. 'Clouds drifted over it from the west; or the church may have been a ship, high-prowed, steering with all its company towards infinity' (p. 76). This

metaphor, which has a purely descriptive function here, is recalled for a serious thematic purpose in a crucial passage much later in the novel, in chapter XIX. That chapter begins with Margaret and her companions standing on the ridge of the Purbeck hills with the south of England spread out before them, and ends with Margaret and Helen arguing about the differences between their values and those of the Wilcoxes. The authorial voice sums up:

> England … For what end are her fair complexities, her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea, sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world's fleet accompanying her towards eternity? (p. 150)

This is very poetic prose, echoing a famous piece of Shakespearean patriotic rhetoric ('this precious stone set in the silver sea'—*Richard II*), and seeking to go even higher up the scale of the Sublime in the striking image of England as a ship of souls sailing towards eternity. If Forster persuades us to accept such high-flown language in what is essentially a prosaic tragi-comedy of manners (and I think he does here) it is partly because he has already planted the trope in our minds in a more subdued form in the earlier chapter. He is not always so successful. Some of the purple passages towards the end of the novel sound like George Meredith on a bad day; for example, 'Let squalor be turned into tragedy, whose eyes are the stars, and whose hands hold the sunset and the dawn' (p. 282).

Returning to chapter XI: after the brief reappearance of the woodcutter early next morning, the narrative focus shifts to the Wilcox family 'attempting breakfast' at Howards End. First we get a rendering of Henry's thoughts about his deceased wife, using free indirect style (grammatically the narrator's discourse, lexically the character's) to convey his state of mind with considerable intimacy and immediacy: 'He had been told of the horror by a strange doctor, whom she had consulted during his absence from town. Was this altogether just? Without fully explaining, she had died. It was a fault on her part, and—tears rushed into his eyes—what a little fault! It was the only time she had deceived him in those thirty years' (p. 77). Then we get a description of Henry's physiognomy from the narrator's point of view, with the narrator's implied judgements on his character: 'the chin, though firm enough in outline, retreated a little, and the lips, ambiguous, were curtained by a moustache' (p. 77). Then we have a sequence of short scenes consisting mainly of dialogue, involving Henry Wilcox, his daughter Evie, her brother Charles and his bride Dolly. We are briefly admitted to Dolly's thoughts, but in a much more summary and therefore dismissive style than that used for Henry Wilcox: 'she wished that Mrs Wilcox, since fated to die, could have died before the marriage, for then less would have been expected of her' (p. 78). Charles and Evie complain pompously about the pollarding of the elms, as a way of not referring to their real feelings. '[T]hey avoided the personal note in life. All Wilcoxes did,' comments the narrator (p. 79). The point of view shifts again, to Charles, and we share his thoughts in free indirect style as he goes out to check on his motor car. Then another dialogue scene: Charles has an altercation with his father's chauffeur which is interrupted by Dolly in a state of panic, summoning him back to the house for a reason she cannot reveal in front of the servant (a frequent dilemma for Forster's characters). The reason is that Henry Wilcox has discovered his wife's note about leaving Howards End to Margaret. A family council ensues in which they reproach the woman for whom they were grieving a few moments earlier, and rationalise their determination to ignore her wish. The ironies are worthy of Jane Austen. But Forster wants to be fair to the Wilcoxes. 'It is … a moment when the commentator should step forward. Ought the Wilcoxes to have offered their home to Margaret? I think not' (p. 84). In ten pages the narrative discourse has shifted in perspective and voice at least ten times.

In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster took issue with the critic Percy Lubbock's insistence, following the precept and practice of Henry James, that a consistent and disciplined 'method' in the handling of point of view was crucial to the craft of fiction. What is really crucial, Forster says, is 'the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says…. Look how Dickens bounces us in *Bleak House*…. Logically, *Bleak House* is all to pieces, but Dickens bounces us, so that we do not mind the shiftings of the viewpoint.'[25] Clearly, this is a tacit defence of his own narrative method.

The reception of *Howards End* on its first publication was enthusiastic. The consensus of reviewers was that with this book Forster had fulfilled the promise of his earlier work and established himself as an important literary novelist. The *Daily Mail* described it as 'The Season's Great Novel' and the *Daily Telegraph* roundly declared, 'Mr E. M. Forster is one of the great novelists.'[26] The *Times Literary Supplement* described it as 'a very remarkable and original book…. What gives Mr Forster's writing its quite unique flavour is [an] … odd vein of charming poetry which slips delicately in and out of his story.'[27] The *Daily News* described it as 'the most significant novel of the year', and commented on its intriguing combination of traditional and modern qualities: 'Mr Forster's method is a sort of bridge between that of Mr Conrad and that of Mr Galsworthy.'[28] Several reviewers felt what subsequent generations of readers have felt—that the book's power and appeal somehow triumphantly survive its flaws. 'Mr E. M. Forster has written a very remarkable book, though he has hardly achieved an altogether satisfactory novel,' opined the anonymous reviewer in the *Westminster Gazette*.[29] Edward Garnett claimed in the *Nation* that 'Mr Forster has sacrificed the inflexibility of artistic truth to the exigences of his philosophical moral,' but was otherwise generous in his praise of a book that 'says most effectively those very things that the intelligent minority feel, but rarely formulate.'[30]

Forster found that he had suddenly become a literary celebrity—fêted, interviewed, the recipient of invitations and fan mail. But he did not have the temperament to really enjoy this success. His biographer P. N. Furbank

plausibly suggests that its main long-term effect was to make him afraid of future failure.[31] Certainly he took many years to produce his next novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), and that proved to be the last one he published in his long lifetime. This barrenness was a matter of regret and puzzlement to his admiring readers. Some light was thrown on it after his death by the public disclosure and discussion of his homosexuality. To friends he had confessed to being bored and frustrated by the impossibility (for a writer of his generation) of dealing openly and directly in his fiction with the only kind of sexual love which really interested him. In old age he even turned against *Howards End* for this reason, recording the following judgement in 1958:

> *Howards End* my best novel and approaching a good novel. Very elaborate and all pervading plot that is seldom tiresome or forced, range of characters, social sense, wisdom, colour. Have only just discovered why I don't care for it: not a single character in it for whom I care…. Perhaps the house in *Howards End*, for which I did once care, took the place of people…. I feel pride in the achievement, but cannot love it, and occasionally the swish of the skirts and the nonsexual embraces irritate.[32]

This comment is characteristically honest, witty and perceptive, but it has something of the weariness and impatience of old age. In middle life Forster wrote a number of stories and a novel, *Maurice*, with homosexual content, which he circulated privately. Some of these writings have been published posthumously, but they cannot be regarded as masterpieces of gay literature. Forster's literary reputation rests on the novels he wrote, not for a coterie, or for himself, but for the literary public at large, and among them *Howards End* will always have a high place.

1 Daniel Born, “Private Gardens, Public Swamps: Forster and the Psychology of Edwardian Culture. *Howards End* and the Revaluation of Liberal Guilt.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 25, no. 2 (1992): 141–59. Born makes some particularly interesting connections between *Howards End* and the arguments of the contemporary American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty.
2 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 7–8. First published 1869.
3 Quoted in Born, p. 158.
4 Ibid., p. 143.
5 P. N. Furbank, *E. M. Forster: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), vol. 1, p. 28.
6 Ibid., p. 142.
7 Ibid., p. 165.
8 Born, p. 149.
9 Kay Dick, ed., *Writers at Work: The* Paris Review *Interviews* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1979), p. 10.
10 I discussed Masterman’s use of *Tono-Bungay* in *Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), part II, chap. 6, “*Tono-Bungay* and the Condition of England.”
11 Furbank, vol. 1, p. 172.
12 Thomas Carlyle, *Past & Present* (London: Dent, 1912), p. 1.
13 Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), p. 69.
14 C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, ed. J. I. Boulton (London: Methuen, 1909), pp. 162, 164–65.
15 *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), p. 100.
16 Frederick C. Crews, *E. M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 7 and 14.
17 Masterman, p. 16.
18 Born, p. 155.
19 ‘I can never be perfectly certain whether Helen was got with child by Leonard Bast or by his fatal forgotten umbrella. All things considered, I think it must have been the umbrella.’ *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. Middleton Murray (London: Constable, 1954), pp. 120–21.
20 F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1962), p. 269.
21 Lionel Trilling, “Forster and the Liberal Imagination,” in *Forster: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 72.
22 Forster, *Aspects of the Novel, and Related Writings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), pp. 102–16.
23 Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” *Sewanee Review* (Spring–Autumn 1945).
24 Dick, ed., p. 15.
25 *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 55.
26 Quoted by Furbank, p. 188.
27 *TLS*, 27 October 1910.
28 *Daily News*, 7 November 1910.
29 *Westminster Gazette*, 19 November 1910.
30 *Nation*, 12 November 1910.
31 Furbank, vol. I, p. 131.
32 Quoted in ibid., p. 190.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text of this edition is that of the Abinger Edition of *Howards End*, edited by Oliver Stallybrass and published by Edward Arnold in 1973. This was based on a collation of earlier editions and Forster's autograph manuscripts. Forster was a careless proofreader of his own work, and never personally checked and approved a definitive version of his novel. Stallybrass's text is generally accepted as authoritative. It differs in about eighty points from any previously published edition, but these variants are not substantial. For a full discussion and presentation of the manuscript evidence, see *The Manuscripts of* Howards End, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).

HOWARDS END

I

ONE MAY AS WELL begin with Helen's letters to her sister.

Howards End, Tuesday.

Dearest Meg,

It isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful—red brick. We can scarcely pack in as it is, and the dear knows what will happen when Paul (younger son) arrives tomorrow. From hall you go right or left into dining-room or drawing-room. Hall itself is practically a room. You open another door in it, and there are the stairs going up in a sort of tunnel to the first floor. Three bedrooms in a row there, and three attics in a row above. That isn't all the house really, but it's all that one notices—nine windows as you look up from the front garden.

Then there's a very big wych-elm—to the left as you look up—leaning a little over the house, and standing on the boundary between the garden and meadow. I quite love that tree already. Also ordinary elms, oaks—no nastier than ordinary oaks—pear trees, apple trees, and a vine. No silver birches, though. However, I must get on to my host and hostess. I only wanted to show that it isn't the least what we expected. Why did we settle that their house would be all gables and wiggles, and their garden all gamboge-coloured paths? I believe simply because we associate them with expensive hotels—Mrs Wilcox trailing in beautiful dresses down long corridors, Mr Wilcox bullying porters, etc. We females are that unjust.

I shall be back Saturday; will let you know train later. They are as angry as I am that you did not come too; really Tibby is too tiresome, he starts a new mortal disease every month. How could he have got hay fever in London? And even if he could, it seems hard that you should give up a visit to hear a schoolboy sneeze. Tell him that Charles Wilcox (the son who is here) has hay fever too, but he's brave, and gets quite cross when we inquire after it. Men like the Wilcoxes would do Tibby a power of good. But you won't agree, and I'd better change the subject.

This long letter is because I'm writing before breakfast. Oh, the beautiful vine leaves! The house is covered with a vine. I looked out earlier, and Mrs Wilcox was already in the garden. She evidently loves it. No wonder she sometimes looks tired. She was watching the large red poppies come out. Then she walked off the lawn to the meadow, whose corner to the right I can just see. Trail, trail, went her long dress over the sopping grass, and she came back with her hands full of the hay that was cut yesterday—I suppose for rabbits or something, as she kept on smelling it. The air here is delicious. Later on I heard the noise of croquet balls, and looked out again, and it was Charles Wilcox practising; they are keen on all games. Presently he started sneezing and had to stop. Then I hear more clicketing, and it is Mr Wilcox practising, and then, 'a-tissue, a-tissue'; he has to stop too. Then Evie comes out, and does some callisthenic exercises on a machine that is tacked on to a greengage tree—they put everything to use—and then she says 'a-tissue', and in she goes. And finally Mrs Wilcox reappears, trail, trail, still smelling hay and looking at the flowers. I inflict all this on you because once you said that life is sometimes life and sometimes only a drama, and one must learn to distinguish tother from which, and up to now I have always put that down as 'Meg's clever nonsense'. But this morning, it really does seem not life but a play, and it did amuse me enormously to watch the W.s. Now Mrs Wilcox has come in.

I am going to wear [omission]. Last night Mrs Wilcox wore an [omission], and Evie [omission]. So it isn't exactly a go-as-you-please place, and if you shut your eyes it still seems the wiggly hotel that we expected. Not if you open them. The dog-roses are too sweet. There is a great hedge of them over the lawn—magnificently tall, so that they fall down in garlands, and nice and thin at the bottom, so that you can see ducks through it and a cow. These belong to the farm, which is the only house near us. There goes the breakfast gong. Much love. Modified love to Tibby. Love to Aunt Juley; how good of her to come and keep you company, but what a bore. Burn this. Will write again Thursday.

Helen.

Howards End, Friday.

Dearest Meg,

I am having a glorious time. I like them all. Mrs Wilcox, if quieter than in Germany, is sweeter than ever, and I never saw anything like her steady unselfishness, and the best of it is that the others do not take advantage of her. They are the very happiest, jolliest family that you can imagine. I do really feel that we are making friends. The fun of it is that they think me a noodle, and say so—at least, Mr Wilcox does—and when that happens, and one doesn't mind, it's a pretty sure test, isn't it? He says the most horrid things about women's suffrage so nicely, and when I said I believed in equality he just folded his arms and gave me such a setting down as I've never had. Meg, shall we ever learn to talk less? I never felt so ashamed of myself in my life. I couldn't point to a time when men had been equal, nor even to a time when the wish to be equal had made them happier in other ways. I couldn't say a word, I had just picked up the notion that equality is good from some book—probably from poetry, or you. Anyhow, it's been knocked into pieces, and, like all people who are really strong, Mr Wilcox did it without hurting me. On the other hand, I laugh at them for catching hay fever. We live like fighting-cocks, and Charles takes us out every day in the motor—a tomb with trees in it, a hermit's house, a wonderful road that was made by the Kings of Mercia—tennis—a cricket match—bridge—and at night we squeeze up in this lovely house. The whole clan's here now—it's like a rabbit warren. Evie is a dear. They want me to stop over Sunday—I suppose it won't matter if I do. Marvellous weather and the air marvellous—views westward to the high ground. Thank you for

your letter. Burn this.

Your affectionate Helen.

Howards End, Sunday.

Dearest dearest Meg,

I do not know what you will say: Paul and I are in love—the younger son who only came here Wednesday.

II

MARGARET GLANCED AT HER sister's note and pushed it over the breakfast-table to her aunt. There was a moment's hush, and then the floodgates opened.

'I can tell you nothing, Aunt Juley. I know no more than you do. We met—we only met the father and mother—abroad last spring. I know so little that I didn't even know their son's name. It's all so—' She waved her hand and laughed a little.

'In that case it is far too sudden.'

'Who knows, Aunt Juley, who knows?'

'But, Margaret dear, I mean, we mustn't be unpractical now that we've come to facts. It *is* too sudden, surely.'

'Who knows!'

'But, Margaret dear—'

'I'll go for her other letters,' said Margaret. 'No, I won't, I'll finish my breakfast. In fact, I haven't them. We met the Wilcoxes on an awful expedition that we made from Heidelberg to Speyer. Helen and I had got it into our heads that there was a grand old cathedral at Speyer—the Archbishop of Speyer was one of the seven electors[1]—you know—"Speyer, Mainz and Köln". Those three sees once commanded the Rhine valley and got it the name of Priest Street.'

'I still feel quite uneasy about this business, Margaret.'

'The train crossed by a bridge of boats, and at first sight it looked quite fine. But oh, in five minutes we had seen the whole thing. The cathedral had been ruined, absolutely ruined, by restoration; not an inch left of the original structure. We wasted a whole day, and came across the Wilcoxes as we were eating our sandwiches in the public gardens. They too, poor things, had been taken in—they were actually stopping at Speyer—and they rather liked Helen insisting that they must fly with us to Heidelberg. As a matter of fact, they did come on next day. We all took some drives together. They knew us well enough to ask Helen to come and see them—at least, I was asked too, but Tibby's illness prevented me, so last Monday she went alone. That's all. You know as much as I do now. It's a young man out of the unknown. She was to have come back Saturday, but put off till Monday, perhaps on account of—I don't know.'

She broke off, and listened to the sounds of a London morning. Their house was in Wickham Place, and fairly quiet, for a lofty promontory of buildings separated it from the main thoroughfare. One had the sense of a backwater, or rather of an estuary, whose waters flowed in from the invisible sea, and ebbed into a profound silence while the waves without were still beating. Though the promontory consisted of flats—expensive, with cavernous entrance halls, full of concierges and palms—it fulfilled its purpose, and gained for the older houses opposite a certain measure of peace. These, too, would be swept away in time, and another promontory would arise upon their site, as humanity piled itself higher and higher on the precious soil of London.

Mrs Munt had her own method of interpreting her nieces. She decided that Margaret was a little hysterical, and was trying to gain time by a torrent of talk. Feeling very diplomatic, she lamented the fate of Speyer, and declared that never, never should she be so misguided as to visit it, and added of her own accord that the principles of restoration were ill understood in Germany. 'The Germans,' she said, 'are too thorough, and this is all very well sometimes, but at other times it does not do.'

'Exactly,' said Margaret; 'Germans are too thorough.' And her eyes began to shine.

'Of course I regard you Schlegels as English,' said Mrs Munt hastily—'English to the backbone.'

Margaret leaned forward and stroked her hand.

'And that reminds me—Helen's letter—'

'Oh yes, Aunt Juley, I am thinking all right about Helen's letter. I know—I must go down and see her. I am thinking about her all right. I am meaning to go down.'

'But go with some plan,' said Mrs Munt, admitting into her kindly voice a note of exasperation. 'Margaret, if I may interfere, don't be taken by surprise. What do you think of the Wilcoxes? Are they our sort? Are they likely people? Could they appreciate Helen, who is to my mind a very special sort of person? Do they care about Literature and Art? That is most important when you come to think of it. Literature and Art. Most important. How old would the son be? She says "younger son". Would he be in a position to marry? Is he likely to make Helen happy? Did you gather—'

‘I gathered nothing.’

They began to talk at once.

‘Then in that case—’

‘In that case I can make no plans, don’t you see.’

‘On the contrary—’

‘I hate plans. I hate lines of action. Helen isn’t a baby.’

‘Then in that case, my dear, why go down?’

Margaret was silent. If her aunt could not see why she must go down, she was not going to tell her. She was not going to say: ‘I love my dear sister; I must be near her at this crisis of her life.’ The affections are more reticent than the passions, and their expression more subtle. If she herself should ever fall in love with a man, she, like Helen, would proclaim it from the house-tops, but as she only loved a sister she used the voiceless language of sympathy.

‘I consider you odd girls,’ continued Mrs Munt, ‘and very wonderful girls, and in many ways far older than your years. But—you won’t be offended?—frankly, I feel you are not up to this business. It requires an older person. Dear, I have nothing to call me back to Swanage.’ She spread out her plump arms. ‘I am all at your disposal. Let me go down to this house whose name I forget instead of you.’

‘Aunt Juley’—she jumped up and kissed her—’I must, must go to Howards End myself. You don’t exactly understand, though I can never thank you properly for offering.’

‘I do understand,’ retorted Mrs Munt, with immense confidence. ‘I go down in no spirit of interference, but to make inquiries. Inquiries are necessary. Now, I am going to be rude. You would say the wrong thing; to a certainty you would. In your anxiety for Helen’s happiness you would offend the whole of these Wilcoxes by asking one of your impetuous questions—not that one minds offending them.’

‘I shall ask no questions. I have it in Helen’s writing that she and a man are in love. There is no question to ask as long as she keeps to that. All the rest isn’t worth a straw. A long engagement if you like, but inquiries, questions, plans, lines of action—no, Aunt Juley, no.’

Away she hurried, not beautiful, not supremely brilliant, but filled with something that took the place of both qualities—something best described as a profound vivacity, a continual and sincere response to all that she encountered in her path through life.

‘If Helen had written the same to me about a shop-assistant or a penniless clerk—’

‘Dear Margaret, do come into the library and shut the door. Your good maids are dusting the banisters.’

‘—or if she had wanted to marry the man who calls for Carter Paterson,[2] I should have said the same.’ Then, with one of those turns that convinced her aunt that she was not mad really, and convinced observers of another type that she was not a barren theorist, she added: ‘Though in the case of Carter Paterson I should want it to be a very long engagement indeed, I must say.’

‘I should think so,’ said Mrs Munt; ‘and, indeed, I can scarcely follow you. Now, just imagine if you said anything of that sort to the Wilcoxes. *I* understand it, but those good people would think you mad. Imagine how disconcerting for Helen! What is wanted is a person who will go slowly, slowly in this business, and see how things are and where they are likely to lead to.’

Margaret was down on this.

‘But you implied just now that the engagement must be broken off.’

‘I think probably it must; but slowly.’

‘Can you break an engagement off slowly?’ Her eyes lit up. ‘What’s an engagement made of, do you suppose? I think it’s made of some hard stuff, that may snap, but can’t break. It is different to the other ties of life. They stretch or bend. They admit of degree. They’re different.’

‘Exactly so. But won’t you let me just run down to Howards House, and save you all the discomfort? I will really not interfere, but I do so thoroughly understand the kind of thing you Schlegels want that one quiet look round will be enough for me.’

Margaret again thanked her, again kissed her, and then ran upstairs to see her brother.

He was not so well.

The hay fever had worried him a good deal all night. His head ached, his eyes were wet, his mucous membrane, he informed her, in a most unsatisfactory condition. The only thing that made life worth living was the thought of Walter Savage Landor, from whose *Imaginary Conversations* she had promised to read at frequent intervals during the day.

It was rather difficult. Something must be done about Helen. She must be assured that it is not a criminal offence to love at first sight. A telegram to this effect would be cold and cryptic, a personal visit seemed each moment more impossible. Now the doctor arrived, and said that Tibby was quite bad. Might it really be best to accept Aunt Juley’s kind offer, and to send her down to Howards End with a note?

Certainly Margaret was impulsive. She did swing rapidly from one decision to another. Running downstairs into the library, she cried: ‘Yes, I have changed my mind; I do wish that you would go.’

There was a train from King’s Cross at eleven. At half past ten Tibby, with rare self-effacement, fell asleep, and Margaret was able to drive her aunt to the station.

‘You will remember, Aunt Juley, not to be drawn into discussing the engagement. Give my letter to Helen, and say whatever you feel yourself, but do keep clear of the relatives. We have scarcely got their names straight yet,

and, besides, that sort of thing is so uncivilized and wrong.'

'So uncivilized?' queried Mrs Munt, fearing that she was losing the point of some brilliant remark.

'Oh, I used an affected word. I only meant would you please only talk the thing over with Helen.'

'Only with Helen.'

'Because—' But it was no moment to expound the personal nature of love. Even Margaret shrank from it, and contented herself with stroking her good aunt's hand, and with meditating, half sensibly and half poetically, on the journey that was about to begin from King's Cross.

Like many others who have lived long in a great capital, she had strong feelings about the various railway termini. They are our gates to the glorious and the unknown. Through them we pass out into adventure and sunshine, to them, alas! we return. In Paddington all Cornwall is latent and the remoter west; down the inclines of Liverpool Street lie fenlands and the illimitable Broads; Scotland is through the pylons[3] of Euston; Wessex behind the poised chaos of Waterloo. Italians realize this, as is natural; those of them who are so unfortunate as to serve as waiters in Berlin call the Anhalt Bahnhof the Stazione d'Italia, because by it they must return to their homes. And he is a chilly Londoner who does not endow his stations with some personality, and extend to them, however shyly, the emotions of fear and love.

To Margaret—I hope that it will not set the reader against her—the station of King's Cross had always suggested infinity. Its very situation—withdrawn a little behind the facile splendours of St Pancras—implied a comment on the materialism of life. Those two great arches, colourless, indifferent, shouldering between them an unlovely clock, were fit portals for some eternal adventure, whose issue might be prosperous, but would certainly not be expressed in the ordinary language of prosperity. If you think this ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it; and let me hasten to add that they were in plenty of time for the train; that Mrs Munt secured a comfortable seat, facing the engine, but not too near it; and that Margaret, on her return to Wickham Place, was confronted with the following telegram:

All over. Wish I had never written. Tell no one.—Helen.

But Aunt Juley was gone—gone irrevocably, and no power on earth could stop her.

III

Most complacently did Mrs Munt rehearse her mission. Her nieces were independent young women, and it was not often that she was able to help them. Emily's daughters had never been quite like other girls. They had been left motherless when Tibby was born, when Helen was five and Margaret herself but thirteen. It was before the passing of the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill,[1] so Mrs Munt could without impropriety offer to go and keep house at Wickham Place. But her brother-in-law, who was peculiar and a German, had referred the question to Margaret, who with the crudity of youth had answered, No, they could manage much better alone. Five years later Mr Schlegel had died too, and Mrs Munt had repeated her offer. Margaret, crude no longer, had been grateful and extremely nice, but the substance of her answer had been the same. 'I must not interfere a third time,' thought Mrs Munt. However, of course, she did. She learned, to her horror, that Margaret, now of age, was taking her money out of the old safe investments and putting it into Foreign Things, which always smash. Silence would have been criminal. Her own fortune was invested in Home Rails, and most ardently did she beg her niece to imitate her. 'Then we should be together, dear.' Margaret, out of politeness, invested a few hundreds in the Nottingham and Derby Railway, and, though the Foreign Things did admirably and the Nottingham and Derby declined with the steady dignity of which only Home Rails are capable, Mrs Munt never ceased to rejoice, and to say: 'I did manage that, at all events. When the smash comes poor Margaret will have a nest-egg to fall back upon.' This year Helen came of age, and exactly the same thing happened in Helen's case; she also would shift her money out of Consols, but she, too, almost without being pressed, consecrated a fraction of it to the Nottingham and Derby Railway. So far so good, but in social matters their aunt had accomplished nothing. Sooner or later the girls would enter on the process known as throwing themselves away, and if they had delayed hitherto it was only that they might throw themselves more vehemently in the future. They saw too many people at Wickham Place—unshaven musicians, an actress even, German cousins (one knows what foreigners are), acquaintances picked up at continental hotels (one knows what they are too). It was interesting, and down at Swanage no one appreciated culture more than Mrs Munt; but it was dangerous, and disaster was bound to come. How right she was, and how lucky to be on the spot when the disaster came!

The train sped northward, under innumerable tunnels. It was only an hour's journey, but Mrs Munt had to raise and lower the window again and again. She passed through the South Welwyn Tunnel, saw light for a moment, and entered the North Welwyn Tunnel, of tragic fame.[2] She traversed the immense viaduct whose arches span untroubled meadows and the dreamy flow of Tewin Water. She skirted the parks of politicians. At times the Great North Road accompanied her, more suggestive of infinity than any railway, awakening, after a nap of a hundred years, to such life as is conferred by the stench of motor-cars, and to such culture as is implied by the

advertisements of anti-bilious pills. To history, to tragedy, to the past, to the future, Mrs Munt remained equally indifferent; hers but to concentrate on the end of her journey,3 and to rescue poor Helen from this dreadful mess.

The station for Howards End was at Hilton, one of the large villages that are strung so frequently along the North Road, and that owe their size to the traffic of coaching and pre-coaching days. Being near London, it had not shared in the rural decay, and its long High Street had budded out right and left into residential estates. For about a mile a series of tiled and slated houses passed before Mrs Munt's inattentive eyes, a series broken at one point by six Danish tumuli that stood shoulder to shoulder along the highroad, tombs of soldiers. Beyond these tumuli habitations thickened, and the train came to a standstill in a tangle that was almost a town.

The station, like the scenery, like Helen's letters, struck an indeterminate note. Into which country will it lead, England or Suburbia? It was new, it had island platforms and a subway, and the superficial comfort exacted by businessmen. But it held hints of local life, personal intercourse, as even Mrs Munt was to discover.

'I want a house,' she confided to the ticket-boy. 'Its name is Howards Lodge. Do you know where it is?'

'Mr Wilcox!' the boy called.

A young man in front of them turned round.

'She's wanting Howards End.'

There was nothing for it but to go forward, though Mrs Munt was too much agitated even to stare at the stranger. But remembering that there were two brothers she had the sense to say to him: 'Excuse me asking, but are you the younger Mr Wilcox or the elder?'

'The younger. Can I do anything for you?'

'Oh, well'—she controlled herself with difficulty. 'Really. Are you? I—' She moved away from the ticket-boy and lowered her voice. 'I am Miss Schlegel's aunt. I ought to introduce myself, oughtn't I? My name is Mrs Munt.'

She was conscious that he raised his cap and said quite coolly: 'Oh, rather; Miss Schlegel is stopping with us. Did you want to see her?'

'Possibly—'

'I'll call you a cab. No; wait a mo.' He thought. 'Our motor's here. I'll run you up in it.'

'That is very kind—'

'Not at all, if you'll just wait till they bring out a parcel from the office. This way.'

'My niece is not with you by any chance?'

'No; I came over with my father. He has gone on north in your train. You'll see Miss Schlegel at lunch. You're coming up to lunch, I hope?'

'I should like to come *up*,' said Mrs Munt, not committing herself to nourishment until she had studied Helen's lover a little more. He seemed a gentleman, but had so rattled her round that her powers of observation were numbed. She glanced at him stealthily. To a feminine eye there was nothing amiss in the sharp depressions at the corners of his mouth, nor in the rather box-like construction of his forehead. He was dark, clean-shaven, and seemed accustomed to command.

'In front or behind? Which do you prefer? It may be windy in front.'

'In front if I may; then we can talk.'

'But excuse me one moment—I can't think what they're doing with that parcel.' He strode into the booking-office, and called with a new voice: 'Hi! Hi, you there! Are you going to keep me waiting all day? Parcel for Wilcox, Howards End. Just look sharp!' Emerging, he said in quieter tones: 'This station's abominably organized; if I had my way, the whole lot of 'em should get the sack. May I help you in?'

'This is very good of you,' said Mrs Munt, as she settled herself into a luxurious cavern of red leather, and suffered her person to be padded with rugs and shawls. She was more civil than she had intended, but really this young man was very kind. Moreover, she was a little afraid of him: his self-possession was extraordinary. 'Very good indeed,' she repeated, adding: 'It is just what I should have wished.'

'Very good of you to say so,' he replied, with a slight look of surprise, which, like most slight looks, escaped Mrs Munt's attention. 'I was just tooling my father over to catch the down train.'

'You see, we heard from Helen this morning.'

Young Wilcox was pouring in petrol, starting his engine, and performing other actions with which this story has no concern. The great car began to rock, and the form of Mrs Munt, trying to explain things, sprang agreeably up and down among the red cushions. 'The mater will be very glad to see you,' he mumbled. 'Hi! I say. Parcel. Parcel for Howards End. Bring it out. Hi!'

A bearded porter emerged with the parcel in one hand and an entry-book in the other. With the gathering whir of the motor these ejaculations mingled: 'Sign, must I? Why the—should I sign after all this bother? Not even got a pencil on you? Remember next time I report you to the station-master. My time's of value, though yours mayn't be. Here'—here being a tip.

'Extremely sorry, Mrs Munt.'

'Not at all, Mr Wilcox.'

'And do you object to going through the village? It is rather a longer spin, but I have one or two commissions.'

'I should love going through the village. Naturally I am very anxious to talk things over with you.'

As she said this she felt ashamed, for she was disobeying Margaret's instructions. Only disobeying them in the letter, surely. Margaret had only warned her against discussing the incident with outsiders. Surely it was not 'uncivilized or wrong' to discuss it with the young man himself, since chance had thrown them together.

A reticent fellow, he made no reply. Mounting by her side, he put on gloves and spectacles, and off they drove, the bearded porter—life is a mysterious business—looking after them with admiration.

The wind was in their faces down the station road, blowing the dust into Mrs Munt's eyes. But as soon as they turned into the Great North Road she opened fire. 'You can well imagine,' she said, 'that the news was a great shock to us.'

'What news?'

'Mr Wilcox,' she said frankly, 'Margaret has told me everything—everything. I have seen Helen's letter.'

He could not look her in the face, as his eyes were fixed on his work; he was travelling as quickly as he dared down the High Street. But he inclined his head in her direction, and said: 'I beg your pardon; I didn't catch.'

'About Helen. Helen, of course. Helen is a very exceptional person—I am sure you will let me say this, feeling towards her as you do—indeed, all the Schlegels are exceptional. I come in no spirit of interference, but it was a great shock.'

They drew up opposite a draper's. Without replying, he turned round in his seat, and contemplated the cloud of dust that they had raised in their passage through the village. It was settling again, but not all into the road from which he had taken it. Some of it had percolated through the open windows, some had whitened the roses and gooseberries of the wayside gardens, while a certain proportion had entered the lungs of the villagers. 'I wonder when they'll learn wisdom and tar the roads,' was his comment. Then a man ran out of the draper's with a roll of oilcloth, and off they went again.

'Margaret could not come herself, on account of poor Tibby, so I am here to represent her and to have a good talk.'

'I'm sorry to be so dense,' said the young man, again drawing up outside a shop. 'But I still haven't quite understood.'

'Helen, Mr Wilcox—my niece and you.'

He pushed up his goggles and gazed at her, absolutely bewildered. Horror smote her to the heart, for even she began to suspect that they were at cross-purposes, and that she had commenced her mission by some hideous blunder.

'Miss Schlegel and myself?' he asked, compressing his lips.

'I trust there has been no misunderstanding,' quavered Mrs Munt. 'Her letter certainly read that way.'

'What way?'

'That you and she—' She paused, then drooped her eyelids.

'I think I catch your meaning,' he said stickily. 'What an extraordinary mistake!'

'Then you didn't the least—' she stammered, getting blood-red in the face, and wishing she had never been born.

'Scarcely, as I am already engaged to another lady.' There was a moment's silence, and then he caught his breath and exploded with, 'Oh, good God! Don't tell me it's some silliness of Paul's.'

'But you are Paul.'

'I'm not.'

'Then why did you say so at the station?'

'I said nothing of the sort.'

'I beg your pardon, you did.'

'I beg your pardon, I did not. My name is Charles.'

'Younger' may mean son as opposed to father, or second brother as opposed to first. There is much to be said for either view, and later on they said it. But they had other questions before them now.

'Do you mean to tell me that Paul—'

But she did not like his voice. He sounded as if he was talking to a porter, and, certain that he had deceived her at the station, she too grew angry.

'Do you mean to tell me that Paul and your niece—'

Mrs Munt—such is human nature—determined that she would champion the lovers. She was not going to be bullied by a severe young man. 'Yes, they care for one another very much indeed,' she said. 'I dare say they will tell you about it by and by. We heard this morning.'

And Charles clenched his fist and cried, 'The idiot, the idiot, the little fool!'

Mrs Munt tried to divest herself of her rugs. 'If that is your attitude, Mr Wilcox, I prefer to walk.'

'I beg you will do no such thing. I take you up this moment to the house. Let me tell you the thing's impossible, and must be stopped.'

Mrs Munt did not often lose her temper, and when she did it was only to protect those whom she loved. On this occasion she blazed out. 'I quite agree, sir. The thing *is* impossible, and I *will* come up and stop it. My niece is a very exceptional person, and I am not inclined to sit still while she throws herself away on those who will not appreciate her.'

Charles worked his jaws.

'Considering she has only known your brother since Wednesday, and only met your father and mother at a stray hotel—'

'Could you possibly lower your voice? The shop-man will overhear.'

'Esprit de classe'—if one may coin the phrase—was strong in Mrs Munt. She sat quivering while a member of the lower orders deposited a metal funnel, a saucepan and a garden squirt beside the roll of oilcloth.

‘Right behind?’

‘Yes, sir.’ And the lower orders vanished in a cloud of dust.

‘I warn you: Paul hasn’t a penny; it’s useless.’

‘No need to warn us, Mr Wilcox, I assure you. The warning is all the other way. My niece has been very foolish, and I shall give her a good scolding and take her back to London with me.’

‘He has to make his way out in Nigeria. He couldn’t think of marrying for years, and when he does it must be a woman who can stand the climate, and is in other ways—Why hasn’t he told us? Of course he’s ashamed. He knows he’s been a fool. And so he has—a damned fool.’

She grew furious.

‘Whereas Miss Schlegel has lost no time in publishing the news.’

‘If I were a man, Mr Wilcox, for that last remark I’d box your ears. You’re not fit to clean my niece’s boots, to sit in the same room with her, and you dare—you actually dare—I decline to argue with such a person.’

‘All I know is, she’s spread the thing and he hasn’t, and my father’s away and I—’

‘And all that I know is—’

‘Might I finish my sentence, please?’

‘No.’

Charles clenched his teeth and sent the motor swerving all over the lane.

She screamed.

So they played the game of Capping Families, a round of which is always played when love would unite two members of our race. But they played it with unusual vigour, stating in so many words that Schlegels were better than Wilcoxes, Wilcoxes better than Schlegels. They flung decency aside. The man was young, the woman deeply stirred; in both a vein of coarseness was latent. Their quarrel was no more surprising than are most quarrels—inevitable at the time, incredible afterwards. But it was more than usually futile. A few minutes, and they were enlightened. The motor drew up at Howards End, and Helen, looking very pale, ran out to meet her aunt.

‘Aunt Juley, I have just had a telegram from Margaret; I—I meant to stop your coming. It isn’t—it’s over.’

The climax was too much for Mrs Munt. She burst into tears.

‘Aunt Juley dear, don’t. Don’t let them know I’ve been so silly. It wasn’t anything. Do bear up for my sake.’

‘Paul,’ cried Charles Wilcox, pulling his gloves off.

‘Don’t let them know. They are never to know.’

‘Oh, my darling Helen—’

‘Paul! Paul!’

A very young man came out of the house.

‘Paul, is there any truth in this?’

‘I didn’t—I don’t—’

‘Yes or no, man; plain question, plain answer. Did or didn’t Miss Schlegel—’

‘Charles dear,’ said a voice from the garden. ‘Charles, dear Charles, one doesn’t ask plain questions. There aren’t such things.’

They were all silent. It was Mrs Wilcox.

She approached just as Helen’s letter had described her, trailing noiselessly over the lawn, and there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands. She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her—that wisdom to which we give the clumsy name of aristocracy. High-born she might not be. But assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her. When she saw Charles angry, Paul frightened and Mrs Munt in tears, she heard her ancestors say: ‘Separate those human beings who will hurt each other most. The rest can wait.’ So she did not ask questions. Still less did she pretend that nothing had happened, as a competent society hostess would have done. She said: ‘Miss Schlegel, would you take your aunt up to your room or to my room, whichever you think best. Paul, do find Evie, and tell her lunch for six, but I’m not sure whether we shall all be downstairs for it.’ And when they had obeyed her she turned to her elder son, who still stood in the throbbing, stinking car, and smiled at him with tenderness, and without saying a word turned away from him towards her flowers.

‘Mother,’ he called, ‘are you aware that Paul has been playing the fool again?’

‘It is all right dear. They have broken off the engagement.’

‘Engagement—!’

‘They do not love any longer, if you prefer it put that way,’ said Mrs Wilcox, stooping down to smell a rose.

IV

HELEN AND HER AUNT returned to Wickham Place in a state of collapse, and for a little time Margaret had three invalids on her hands. Mrs Munt soon recovered. She possessed to a remarkable degree the power of distorting the

past, and before many days were over she had forgotten the part played by her own imprudence in the catastrophe. Even at the crisis she had cried, 'Thank goodness, poor Margaret is saved this!' which during the journey to London evolved into 'It had to be gone through by someone,' which in its turn ripened into the permanent form of 'The one time I really did help Emily's girls was over the Wilcox business.' But Helen was a more serious patient. New ideas had burst upon her like a thunderclap, and by them and by their reverberations she had been stunned.

The truth was that she had fallen in love, not with an individual, but with a family.

Before Paul arrived she had, as it were, been tuned up into his key. The energy of the Wilcoxes had fascinated her, had created new images of beauty in her responsive mind. To be all day with them in the open air, to sleep at night under their roof, had seemed the supreme joy of life, and had led to that abandonment of personality that is a possible prelude to love. She had *liked* giving in to Mr Wilcox, or Evie, or Charles; she had *liked* being told that her notions of life were sheltered or academic; that Equality was nonsense, Votes for Women nonsense, Socialism nonsense, Art and Literature, except when conducive to strengthening the character, nonsense. One by one the Schlegel fetishes had been overthrown, and, though professing to defend them, she had rejoiced. When Mr Wilcox said that one sound man of business did more good to the world than a dozen of your social reformers, she had swallowed the curious assertion without a gasp, and had leant back luxuriously among the cushions of his motor-car. When Charles said, 'Why be so polite to servants? They don't understand it,' she had not given the Schlegel retort of 'If they don't understand it, I do.' No; she had vowed to be less polite to servants in the future. 'I am swathed in cant,' she thought, 'and it is good for me to be stripped of it.' And all that she thought or did or breathed was a quiet preparation for Paul. Paul was inevitable. Charles was taken up with another girl, Mr Wilcox was so old, Evie so young, Mrs Wilcox so different. Round the absent brother she began to throw the halo of Romance, to irradiate him with all the splendour of those happy days, to feel that in him she should draw nearest to the robust ideal. He and she were about the same age, Evie said. Most people thought Paul handsomer than his brother. He was certainly a better shot, though not so good at golf. And when Paul appeared, flushed with the triumph of getting through an examination, and ready to flirt with any pretty girl, Helen met him halfway, or more than halfway, and turned towards him on the Sunday evening.

He had been talking of his approaching exile in Nigeria, and he should have continued to talk of it, and allowed their guest to recover. But the heave of her bosom flattered him. Passion was possible, and he became passionate. Deep down in him something whispered: 'This girl would let you kiss her; you might not have such a chance again.'

That was 'how it happened', or, rather, how Helen described it to her sister, using words even more unsympathetic than my own. But the poetry of that kiss, the wonder of it, the magic that there was in life for hours after it—who can describe that? It is so easy for an Englishman to sneer at these chance collisions of human beings. To the insular cynic and the insular moralist they offer an equal opportunity. It is so easy to talk of 'passing emotion', and to forget how vivid the emotion was ere it passed. Our impulse to sneer, to forget, is at root a good one. We recognize that emotion is not enough, and that men and women are personalities capable of sustained relations, not mere opportunities for an electrical discharge. Yet we rate the impulse too highly. We do not admit that by collisions of this trivial sort the doors of heaven may be shaken open. To Helen, at all events, her life was to bring nothing more intense than the embrace of this boy who played no part in it. He had drawn her out of the house, where there was danger of surprise and light; he had led her by a path he knew, until they stood under the column of the vast wych-elm. A man in the darkness, he had whispered 'I love you' when she was desiring love. In time his slender personality faded, the scene that he had evoked endured. In all the variable years that followed she never saw the like of it again.

'I understand,' said Margaret—'at least, I understand as much as ever is understood of these things. Tell me now what happened on the Monday morning.'

'It was over at once.'

'How, Helen?'

'I was still happy while I dressed, but as I came downstairs I got nervous, and when I went into the dining-room I knew it was no good. There was Evie—I can't explain—managing the tea-urn, and Mr Wilcox reading *The Times*.'

'Was Paul there?'

'Yes; and Charles was talking to him about Stocks and Shares, and he looked frightened.'

By slight indications the sisters could convey much to each other. Margaret saw horror latent in the scene, and Helen's next remark did not surprise her.

'Somehow, when that kind of man looks frightened it is too awful. It is all right for us to be frightened, or for men of another sort—father, for instance; but for men like that! When I saw all the others so placid, and Paul mad with terror in case I said the wrong thing, I felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness.'

'I don't think that. The Wilcoxes struck me as being genuine people, particularly the wife.'

'No, I don't really think that. But Paul was so broad-shouldered; all kinds of extraordinary things made it worse, and I knew that it would never do—never. I said to him after breakfast, when the others were practising strokes, "We rather lost our heads," and he looked better at once, though frightfully ashamed. He began a speech about having no money to marry on, but it hurt him to make it, and I stopped him. Then he said: "I must beg your

pardon over this, Miss Schlegel; I can't think what came over me last night." And I said: "Nor what over me; never mind." And then we parted—at least, until I remembered that I had written straight off to tell you the night before, and that frightened him again. I asked him to send a telegram for me, for I knew you would be coming or something; and he tried to get hold of the motor, but Charles and Mr Wilcox wanted it to go to the station; and Charles offered to send the telegram for me, and then I had to say that the telegram was of no consequence, for Paul said Charles might read it, and though I wrote it out several times he always said people would suspect something. He took it himself at last, pretending that he must walk down to get cartridges, and, what with one thing and the other, it was not handed in at the post office until too late. It was the most terrible morning. Paul disliked me more and more, and Evie talked cricket averages till I nearly screamed. I cannot think how I stood her all the other days. At last Charles and his father started for the station, and then came your telegram warning me that Aunt Juley was coming by that train, and Paul—oh, rather horrible—said that I had muddled it. But Mrs Wilcox knew.'

'Knew what?'

'Everything, though we neither of us told her a word, and had known all along, I think.'

'Oh, she must have overheard you.'

'I suppose so, but it seemed wonderful. When Charles and Aunt Juley drove up, calling each other names, Mrs Wilcox stepped in from the garden and made everything less terrible. Ugh! but it has been a disgusting business. To think that—' She sighed.

'To think that because you and a young man meet for a moment there must be all these telegrams and anger,' supplied Margaret.

Helen nodded.

'I've often thought about it, Helen. It's one of the most interesting things in the world. The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched—a life in which telegrams and anger count. Personal relations, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements; death, death duties. So far I'm clear. But here's my difficulty. This outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one—there's grit in it. It does breed character. Do personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end?'

'Oh, Meg, that's what I felt, only not so clearly, when the Wilcoxes were so competent, and seemed to have their hands on all the ropes.'

'Don't you feel it now?'

'I remember Paul at breakfast,' said Helen quietly. 'I shall never forget him. He had nothing to fall back upon. I know that personal relations are the real life, for ever and ever.'

'Amen!'

So the Wilcox episode fell into the background, leaving behind it memories of sweetness and horror that mingled, and the sisters pursued the life that Helen had commended. They talked to each other and to other people, they filled the tall thin house at Wickham Place with those whom they liked or could befriend. They even attended public meetings. In their own fashion they cared deeply about politics, though not as politicians would have us care; they desired that public life should mirror whatever is good in the life within. Temperance, tolerance and sexual equality were intelligible cries to them; whereas they did not follow our Forward Policy in Tibet[1] with the keen attention that it merits, and would at times dismiss the whole British Empire with a puzzled, if reverent, sigh. Not out of them are the shows of history erected: the world would be a gray, bloodless place were it entirely composed of Miss Schlegels. But, the world being what it is, perhaps they shine out in it like stars.

A word on their origin. They were not 'English to the backbone', as their aunt had piously asserted. But, on the other hand, they were not 'Germans of the dreadful sort'. Their father had belonged to a type that was more prominent in Germany fifty years ago than now. He was not the aggressive German, so dear to the English journalist, nor the domestic German, so dear to the English wit. If one classed him at all it would be as the countryman of Hegel and Kant, as the idealist, inclined to be dreamy, whose Imperialism was the Imperialism of the air. Not that his life had been inactive. He had fought like blazes against Denmark, Austria, France. But he had fought without visualizing the results of victory. A hint of the truth broke on him after Sedan,[2] when he saw the dyed moustaches of Napoleon going gray; another when he entered Paris, and saw the smashed windows of the Tuileries. Peace came—it was all very immense, one had turned into an Empire—but he knew that some quality had vanished for which not all Alsace-Lorraine could compensate him. Germany a commercial power, Germany a naval power, Germany with colonies here and a Forward Policy there, and legitimate aspirations in the other place, might appeal to others, and be fitly served by them; for his own part, he abstained from the fruits of victory, and naturalized himself in England. The more earnest members of his family never forgave him, and knew that his children, though scarcely English of the dreadful sort, would never be German to the backbone. He had obtained work in one of our provincial universities, and there married Poor Emily (or *Die Engländerin*,[3] as the case may be), and as she had money they proceeded to London, and came to know a good many people. But his gaze was always fixed beyond the sea. It was his hope that the clouds of materialism obscuring the Fatherland would part in time, and the mild intellectual light re-emerge. 'Do you imply that we Germans are *stupid*, Uncle Ernst?' exclaimed a haughty and magnificent nephew. Uncle Ernst replied: 'To my mind. You use the intellect, but you no longer care about it. That I call stupidity.' As the haughty nephew did not follow, he continued: 'You only care about the things that you can use, and therefore arrange them in the following order: money, supremely useful; intellect, rather useful; imagination, of no use at all. No'—for the other had protested—'your Pan-Germanism is no more

imaginative than is our Imperialism over here. It is the vice of a vulgar mind to be thrilled by bigness, to think that a thousand square miles are a thousand times more wonderful than one square mile, and that a million square miles are almost the same as heaven. *That* is not imagination. No, it kills it. When their poets over here try to celebrate bigness they are dead at once, and naturally. Your poets too are dying, your philosophers, your musicians, to whom Europe has listened for two hundred years. Gone. Gone with the little courts that nurtured them—gone with Esterház and Weimar.[4] What? What's that? Your universities? Oh yes, you have learned men, who collect more facts than do the learned men of England. They collect facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?'

To all this Margaret listened, sitting on the haughty nephew's knee.

It was a unique education for the little girls. The haughty nephew would be at Wickham Place one day, bringing with him an even haughtier wife, both convinced that Germany was appointed by God to govern the world. Aunt Juley would come the next day, convinced that Great Britain had been appointed to the same post by the same authority. Were both these loud-voiced parties right? On one occasion they had met, and Margaret with clasped hands had implored them to argue the subject out in her presence. Whereat they blushed, and began to talk about the weather. 'Papa,' she cried—she was a most offensive child—'why will they not discuss this most clear question?' Her father, surveying the parties grimly, replied that he did not know. Putting her head on one side, Margaret then remarked: 'To me one of two things is very clear: either God does not know his own mind about England and Germany, or else these do not know the mind of God.' A hateful little girl, but at thirteen she had grasped a dilemma that most people travel through life without perceiving. Her brain darted up and down; it grew pliant and strong. Her conclusion was, that any human being lies nearer to the unseen than any organization, and from this she never varied.

Helen advanced along the same lines, though with a more irresponsible tread. In character she resembled her sister, but she was pretty, and so apt to have a more amusing time. People gathered round her more readily, especially when they were new acquaintances, and she did enjoy a little homage very much. When their father died and they ruled alone at Wickham Place, she often absorbed the whole of the company, while Margaret—both were tremendous talkers—fell flat. Neither sister bothered about this. Helen never apologized afterwards, Margaret did not feel the slightest rancour. But looks have their influence upon character. The sisters were alike as little girls, but at the time of the Wilcox episode their methods were beginning to diverge: the younger was rather apt to entice people, and, in enticing them, to be herself enticed; the elder went straight ahead, and accepted an occasional failure as part of the game.

Little need be premised about Tibby. He was now an intelligent man of sixteen, but dyspeptic and difficile.

V

IT WILL BE GENERALLY admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it. Whether you are like Mrs Munt, and tap surreptitiously when the tunes come—of course, not so as to disturb the others; or like Helen, who can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music's flood; or like Margaret, who can only see the music; or like Tibby, who is profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee; or like their cousin, Fräulein Mosebach, who remembers all the time that Beethoven is 'echt Deutsch';[1] or like Fräulein Mosebach's young man, who can remember nothing but Fräulein Mosebach: in any case, the passion of your life becomes more vivid, and you are bound to admit that such a noise is cheap at two shillings. It is cheap, even if you hear it in the Queen's Hall, dreariest music-room in London, though not as dreary as the Free Trade Hall, Manchester; and even if you sit on the extreme left of that hall, so that the brass bumps at you before the rest of the orchestra arrives, it is still cheap.

'Who is Margaret talking to?' said Mrs Munt, at the conclusion of the first movement. She was again in London on a visit to Wickham Place.

Helen looked down the long line of their party, and said that she did not know.

'Would it be some young man or other whom she takes an interest in?'

'I expect so,' Helen replied. Music enwrapped her, and she could not enter into the distinction that divides young men whom one takes an interest in from young men whom one knows.

'You girls are so wonderful in always having—oh dear! We mustn't talk.'

For the Andante had begun—very beautiful, but bearing a family likeness to all the other beautiful Andantes that Beethoven has written, and, to Helen's mind, rather disconnecting the heroes and shipwrecks of the first movement from the heroes and goblins of the third. She heard the tune through once, and then her attention wandered, and she gazed at the audience, or the organ, or the architecture. Much did she censure the attenuated Cupids who encircle the ceiling of the Queen's Hall, inclining each to each with vapid gesture, and clad in sallow pantaloons, on which the October sunlight struck. 'How awful to marry a man like those Cupids!' thought Helen. Here Beethoven started decorating his tune, so she heard him through once more, and then she smiled at her

cousin Frieda. But Frieda, listening to Classical Music, could not respond. Herr Liesecke, too, looked as if wild horses could not make him inattentive; there were lines across his forehead, his lips were parted, his pince-nez at right angles to his nose, and he had laid a thick, white hand on either knee. And next to her was Aunt Juley, so British, and wanting to tap. How interesting that row of people was! What diverse influences had gone to their making! Here Beethoven, after humming and hawing with great sweetness, said 'Heigho' and the Andante came to an end. Applause, and a round of wunderschöning and prachtvolleying[2] from the German contingent. Margaret started talking to her new young man; Helen said to her aunt: 'Now comes the wonderful movement: first of all the goblins, and then a trio of elephants dancing'; and Tibby implored the company generally to look out for the transitional passage on the drum.

'On the what, dear?'

'On the *drum*, Aunt Juley.'

'No; look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back,' breathed Helen, as the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right.

Her brother raised his finger: it was the transitional passage on the drum.

For, as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted. He appeared in person. He gave them a little push, and they began to walk in a major key instead of in a minor, and then—he blew with his mouth and they were scattered! Gusts of splendour, gods and demigods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death! Oh, it all burst before the girl, and she even stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible. Any fate was titanic; any contest desirable; conqueror and conquered would alike be applauded by the angels of the utmost stars.

And the goblins—they had not really been there at all? They were only the phantoms of cowardice and unbelief? One healthy human impulse would dispel them? Men like the Wilcoxes, or President Roosevelt,[3] would say yes. Beethoven knew better. The goblins really had been there. They might return—and they did. It was as if the splendour of life might boil over and waste to steam and froth. In its dissolution one heard the terrible, ominous note, and a goblin, with increased malignity, walked quietly over the universe from end to end. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! Even the flaming ramparts of the world might fall.

Beethoven chose to make all right in the end. He built the ramparts up. He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. He brought back the gusts of splendour, the heroism, the youth, the magnificence of life and of death, and, amid vast roarings of a superhuman joy, he led his Fifth Symphony to its conclusion. But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.

Helen pushed her way out during the applause. She desired to be alone. The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it as a tangible statement, which could never be superseded. The notes meant this and that to her, and they could have no other meaning, and life could have no other meaning. She pushed right out of the building, and walked slowly down the outside staircase, breathing the autumnal air, and then she strolled home.

'Margaret,' called Mrs Munt, 'is Helen all right?'

'Oh yes.'

'She is always going away in the middle of a programme,' said Tibby.

'The music has evidently moved her deeply,' said Fräulein Mosebach.

'Excuse me,' said Margaret's young man, who had for some time been preparing a sentence, 'but that lady has, quite inadvertently, taken my umbrella.'

'Oh, good gracious me!—I am so sorry. Tibby, run after Helen.'

'I shall miss the Four Serious Songs if I do.'

'Tibby love, you must go.'

'It isn't of any consequence,' said the young man, in truth a little uneasy about his umbrella.

'But of course it is. Tibby! Tibby!'

Tibby rose to his feet, and wilfully caught his person on the backs of the chairs. By the time he had tipped up the seat and had found his hat, and had deposited his full score in safety, it was 'too late' to go after Helen. The Four Serious Songs had begun, and one could not move during their performance.

'My sister is so careless,' whispered Margaret.

'Not at all,' replied the young man; but his voice was dead and cold.

'If you would give me your address—'

'Oh, not at all, not at all'; and he wrapped his greatcoat over his knees.

Then the Four Serious Songs rang shallow in Margaret's ears. Brahms, for all his grumbling and grizzling, had never guessed what it felt like to be suspected of stealing an umbrella. For this fool of a young man thought that she and Helen and Tibby had been playing the confidence trick on him, and that if he gave his address they would break into his rooms some midnight or other and steal his walking-stick too. Most ladies would have laughed, but

Margaret really minded, for it gave her a glimpse into squalor. To trust people is a luxury in which only the wealthy can indulge; the poor cannot afford it. As soon as Brahms had grunted himself out, she gave him her card and said: 'That is where we live; if you preferred, you could call for the umbrella after the concert, but I didn't like to trouble you when it has all been our fault.'

His face brightened a little when he saw that Wickham Place was W.[4] It was sad to see him corroded with suspicion, and yet not daring to be impolite, in case these well-dressed people were honest after all. She took it as a good sign that he said to her, 'It's a fine programme this afternoon, is it not?' for this was the remark with which he had originally opened, before the umbrella intervened.

'The Beethoven's fine,' said Margaret, who was not a female of the encouraging type. 'I don't like the Brahms, though, nor the Mendelssohn that came first—and ugh! I don't like this Elgar[5] that's coming.'

'What, what?' called Herr Liesecke, overhearing. 'The "Pomp and Circumstance" will not be fine?'

'Oh, Margaret, you tiresome girl!' cried her aunt. 'Here have I been persuading Herr Liesecke to stop for "Pomp and Circumstance", and you are undoing all my work. I am so anxious for him to hear what *we* are doing in music. Oh, you mustn't run down our English composers, Margaret.'

'For my part, I have heard the composition at Stettin,' said Fräulein Mosebach. 'On two occasions. It is dramatic, a little.'

'Frieda, you despise English music. You know you do. And English art. And English literature, except Shakespeare, and he's a German. Very well, Frieda, you may go.'

The lovers laughed and glanced at each other. Moved by a common impulse, they rose to their feet and fled from 'Pomp and Circumstance'.

'We have this call to pay in Finsbury Circus, it is true,' said Herr Liesecke, as he edged past her and reached the gangway just as the music started.

'Margaret—' loudly whispered by Aunt Juley. 'Margaret, Margaret! Fräulein Mosebach has left her beautiful little bag behind her on the seat.'

Sure enough, there was Frieda's reticule, containing her address-book, her pocket dictionary, her map of London and her money.

'Oh, what a bother—what a family we are! Fr—Frieda!'

'Hush!' said all those who thought the music fine.

'But it's the number they want in Finsbury Circus—'

'Might I—couldn't I—' said the suspicious young man, and got very red.

'Oh, I would be so grateful.'

He took the bag—money clinking inside it—and slipped up the gangway with it. He was just in time to catch them at the swing-door, and he received a pretty smile from the German girl and a fine bow from her cavalier. He returned to his seat upsides with the world. The trust that they had reposed in him was trivial, but he felt that it cancelled his mistrust for them, and that probably he would not be 'had' over his umbrella. This young man had been 'had' in the past—badly, perhaps overwhelmingly—and now most of his energies went in defending himself against the unknown. But this afternoon—perhaps on account of music—he perceived that one must slack off occasionally, or what is the good of being alive? Wickham Place, W., though a risk, was as safe as most things, and he would risk it.

So when the concert was over and Margaret said, 'We live quite near; I am going there now. Could you walk round with me, and we'll find your umbrella?' he said 'Thank you' peaceably, and followed her out of the Queen's Hall. She wished that he was not so anxious to hand a lady downstairs, or to carry a lady's programme for her—his class was near enough her own for its manners to vex her. But she found him interesting on the whole—everyone interested the Schlegels on the whole at that time—and while her lips talked culture her heart was planning to invite him to tea.

'How tired one gets after music!' she began.

'Do you find the atmosphere of Queen's Hall oppressive?'

'Yes, horribly.'

'But surely the atmosphere of Covent Garden is even more oppressive.'

'Do you go there much?'

'When my work permits, I attend the gallery for the Royal Opera.'

Helen would have exclaimed, 'So do I. I love the gallery,' and thus have endeared herself to the young man. Helen could do these things. But Margaret had an almost morbid horror of 'drawing people out', of 'making things go'. She had been to the gallery at Covent Garden but she did not 'attend' it, preferring the more expensive seats; still less did she love it. So she made no reply.

'This year I have been three times—to *Faust, Tosca*, and—' Was it 'Tannhouser' or 'Tannhoyser'? Better not risk the word.

Margaret disliked *Tosca* and *Faust*. And so, for one reason and another, they walked on in silence, chaperoned by the voice of Mrs Munt, who was getting into difficulties with her nephew.

'I do in a *way* remember the passage, Tibby, but when every instrument is so beautiful it is difficult to pick out one thing rather than another. I am sure that you and Helen take me to the very nicest concerts. Not a dull note from beginning to end. I only wish that our German friends would have stayed till it finished.'

'But surely you haven't forgotten the drum steadily beating on the low C, Aunt Juley?' came Tibby's voice. 'No

one could. It's unmistakable.'

'A specially loud part?' hazarded Mrs Munt. 'Of course I do not go in for being musical,' she added, the shot failing. 'I only care for music—a very different thing. But still I will say this for myself—I do know when I like a thing and when I don't. Some people are the same about pictures. They can go into a picture gallery—Miss Conder can—and say straight off what they feel, all round the wall. I never could do that. But music is so different to pictures, to my mind. When it comes to music I am as safe as houses, and I assure you, Tibby, I am by no means pleased by everything. There was a thing—something about a faun in French[6]—which Helen went into ecstasies over, but I thought it most tinkling and superficial, and said so, and I held to my opinion too.'

'Do you agree?' asked Margaret. 'Do you think music is so different to pictures?'

'I—I should have thought so, kind of,' he said.

'So should I. Now my sister declares they're just the same. We have great arguments over it. She says I'm dense; I say she's sloppy.' Getting under way, she cried: 'Now, doesn't it seem absurd to you? What *is* the good of the arts if they're interchangeable? What *is* the good of the ear if it tells you the same as the eye? Helen's one aim is to translate tunes into the language of painting, and pictures into the language of music. It's very ingenious, and she says several pretty things in the process, but what's gained, I'd like to know? Oh, it's all rubbish, radically false. If Monet's really Debussy, and Debussy's really Monet, neither gentleman is worth his salt—that's my opinion.'

Evidently these sisters quarrelled.

'Now, this very symphony that we've just been having—she won't let it alone. She labels it with meanings from start to finish; turns it into literature. I wonder if the day will ever return when music will be treated as music. Yet I don't know. There's my brother—behind us. He treats music as music, and oh, my goodness! He makes me angrier than anyone, simply furious. With him I daren't even argue.'

An unhappy family, if talented.

'But, of course, the real villain is Wagner. He has done more than any man in the nineteenth century towards the muddling of the arts. I do feel that music is in a very serious state just now, though extraordinarily interesting. Every now and then in history there do come these terrible geniuses, like Wagner, who stir up all the wells of thought at once. For a moment it's splendid. Such a splash as never was. But afterwards—such a lot of mud; and the wells—as it were, they communicate with each other too easily now, and not one of them will run quite clear. That's what Wagner's done.'

Her speeches fluttered away from the young man like birds. If only he could talk like this, he would have caught the world. Oh, to acquire culture! Oh, to pronounce foreign names correctly! Oh, to be well-informed, discoursing at ease on every subject that a lady started! But it would take one years. With an hour at lunch and a few shattered hours in the evening, how was it possible to catch up with leisured women, who had been reading steadily from childhood? His brain might be full of names, he might even have heard of Monet and Debussy; the trouble was that he could not string them together into a sentence, he could not make them 'tell', he could not quite forget about his stolen umbrella. Yes, the umbrella was the real trouble. Behind Monet and Debussy the umbrella persisted, with the steady beat of a drum. 'I suppose my umbrella will be all right,' he was thinking. 'I don't really mind about it. I will think about music instead. I suppose my umbrella will be all right.' Earlier in the afternoon he had worried about seats. Ought he to have paid as much as two shillings? Earlier still he had wondered, 'Shall I try to do without a programme?' There had always been something to worry him ever since he could remember, always something that distracted him in the pursuit of beauty. For he did pursue beauty, and, therefore, Margaret's speeches did flutter away from him like birds.

Margaret talked ahead, occasionally saying, 'Don't you think so? Don't you feel the same?' And once she stopped, and said, 'Oh, do interrupt me!' which terrified him. She did not attract him, though she filled him with awe. Her figure was meagre, her face seemed all teeth and eyes, her references to her sister and her brother were uncharitable. For all her cleverness and culture, she was probably one of those soulless, atheistical women who have been so shown up by Miss Corelli.[7] It was surprising (and alarming) that she should suddenly say: 'I do hope that you'll come in and have some tea.'

'I do hope that you'll come in and have some tea. We should be so glad. I have dragged you so far out of your way.'

They had arrived at Wickham Place. The sun had set, and the backwater, in deep shadow, was filling with a gentle haze. To the right the fantastic skyline of the flats towered black against the hues of evening; to the left the older houses raised a square-cut, irregular parapet against the gray. Margaret fumbled for her latchkey. Of course she had forgotten it. So, grasping her umbrella by its ferrule, she leant over the area and tapped at the dining-room window.

'Helen! Let us in!'

'All right,' said a voice.

'You've been taking this gentleman's umbrella.'

'Taken a what?' said Helen, opening the door. 'Oh, what's that? Do come in! How do you do?'

'Helen, you must not be so ramshackly. You took this gentleman's umbrella away from Queen's Hall, and he has had the trouble of coming round for it.'

'Oh, I am so sorry!' cried Helen, all her hair flying. She had pulled off her hat as soon as she returned, and had flung herself into the big dining-room chair. 'I do nothing but steal umbrellas. I am so very sorry! Do come in and choose one. Is yours a hooky or a nobbly? Mine's a nobbly—at least, I *think* it is.'

The light was turned on, and they began to search the hall, Helen, who had abruptly parted with the Fifth Symphony, commenting with shrill little cries.

'Don't you talk, Meg! You stole an old gentleman's silk top-hat. Yes, she did, Aunt Juley. It is a positive fact. She thought it was a muff. Oh, heavens! I've knocked the In and Out card down. Where's Frieda? Tibby, why don't you ever—no, I can't remember what I was going to say. That wasn't it, but do tell the maids to hurry tea up. What about this umbrella?' She opened it. 'No, it's all gone along the seams. It's an appalling umbrella. It must be mine.'

But it was not.

He took it from her, murmured a few words of thanks, and then fled, with the lilting step of the clerk.

'But if you will stop—' cried Margaret. 'Now, Helen, how stupid you've been!'

'What ever have I done?'

'Don't you see that you've frightened him away? I meant him to stop to tea. You oughtn't to talk about stealing or holes in an umbrella. I saw his nice eyes getting so miserable. No, it's not a bit of good now.' For Helen had darted out into the street, shouting, 'Oh, do stop!'

'I dare say it is all for the best,' opined Mrs Munt. 'We know nothing about the young man, Margaret, and your drawing-room is full of very tempting little things.'

But Helen cried: 'Aunt Juley, how can you! You make me more and more ashamed. I'd rather he *had* been a thief and taken all the apostle spoons[8] than that I—well, I must shut the front door, I suppose. One more failure for Helen.'

'Yes, I think the apostle spoons could have gone as rent,' said Margaret. Seeing that her aunt did not understand, she added: 'You remember "rent"? It was one of father's words—rent to the ideal, to his own faith in human nature. You remember how he would trust strangers, and if they fooled him he would say, "It's better to be fooled than to be suspicious"—that the confidence trick is the work of man, but the want-of-confidence trick is the work of the devil.'

'I remember something of the sort now,' said Mrs Munt, rather tartly, for she longed to add: 'It was lucky that your father married a wife with money.' But this was unkind, and she contented herself with 'Why, he might have stolen the little Ricketts[9] picture as well.'

'Better that he had,' said Helen stoutly.

'No, I agree with Aunt Juley,' said Margaret. 'I'd rather mistrust people than lose my little Ricketts. There are limits.'

Their brother, finding the incident commonplace, had stolen upstairs to see whether there were scones for tea. He warmed the teapot—almost too deftly—rejected the Orange Pekoe that the parlour-maid had provided, poured in five spoonfuls of a superior blend, filled up with really boiling water, and now called the ladies to be quick or they would lose the aroma.

'All right, Auntie Tibby,' called Helen, while Margaret, thoughtful again, said: 'In a way, I wish we had a real boy in the house—the kind of boy who cares for men. It would make entertaining so much easier.'

'So do I,' said her sister. 'Tibby only cares for cultured females singing Brahms.' And when they joined him she said rather sharply: 'Why didn't you make that young man welcome, Tibby? You must do the host a little, you know. You ought to have taken his hat and coaxed him into stopping, instead of letting him be swamped by screaming women.'

Tibby sighed, and drew a long strand of hair over his forehead.

'Oh, it's no good looking superior. I mean what I say.'

'Leave Tibby alone!' said Margaret, who could not bear her brother to be scolded.

'Here's the house a regular hen-coop!' grumbled Helen.

'Oh, my dear!' protested Mrs Munt. 'How can you say such dreadful things? The number of men you get here has always astonished me. If there is any danger it's the other way round.'

'Yes, but it's the wrong sort of men, Helen means.'

'No, I don't,' corrected Helen. 'We get the right sort of man, but the wrong side of him, and I say that's Tibby's fault. There ought to be a something about the house—an—I don't know what.'

'A touch of the W.s, perhaps?'

Helen put out her tongue.

'Who are the W.s?' asked Tibby.

'The W.s are things I and Meg and Aunt Juley know about and you don't, so there!'

'I suppose that ours is a female house,' said Margaret, 'and one must just accept it. No, Aunt Juley, I don't mean that this house is full of women. I am trying to say something much more clever. I mean that it was irrevocably feminine, even in father's time. Now I'm sure you understand! Well, I'll give you another example. It'll shock you, but I don't care. Suppose Queen Victoria gave a dinner-party, and that the guests had been Leighton, Millais, Swinburne, Rossetti, Meredith, Fitzgerald, etc. Do you suppose that the atmosphere of that dinner would have been artistic? Heavens, no! The very chairs on which they sat would have seen to that. So with our house—it must be feminine, and all we can do is to see that it isn't effeminate. Just as another house that I can mention, but won't, sounded irrevocably masculine, and all its inmates can do is to see that it isn't brutal.'

'That house being the W.s' house, I presume,' said Tibby.

'You're not going to be told about the W.s, my child,' Helen cried, 'so don't you think it. And on the other hand I don't the least mind if you find out, so don't you think you've done anything clever, in either case. Give me a

cigarette.'

'You do what you can for the house,' said Margaret. 'The drawing-room reeks of smoke.'

'If you smoked too, the house might suddenly turn masculine. Atmosphere is probably a question of touch and go. Even at Queen Victoria's dinner-party—if something had been just a little different—perhaps if she'd worn a clinging Liberty tea-gown instead of a magenta satin—'

'With an Indian shawl over her shoulders—'

'Fastened at the bosom with a Cairngorm pin[10]—'

Bursts of disloyal laughter—you must remember that they are half German—greeted these suggestions, and Margaret said pensively: 'How inconceivable it would be if the Royal Family cared about Art.' And the conversation drifted away and away, and Helen's cigarette turned to a spot in the darkness, and the great flats opposite were sown with lighted windows, which vanished and were relit again, and vanished incessantly. Beyond them the thoroughfare roared gently—a tide that could never be quiet, while in the east, invisible behind the smokes of Wapping, the moon was rising.

'That reminds me, Margaret. We might have taken that young man into the dining-room, at all events. Only the majolica plate—and that is so firmly set in the wall. I am really distressed that he had no tea.'

For that little incident had impressed the three women more than might be supposed. It remained as a goblin footfall, as a hint that all is not for the best in the best of all possible worlds,[11] and that beneath these superstructures of wealth and art there wanders an ill-fed boy, who has recovered his umbrella indeed, but who has left no address behind him, and no name.

VI

We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk.

The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more. He knew that he was poor, and would admit it; he would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich. This may be splendid of him. But he was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it. He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and his body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food. Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured civilizations of the past, he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded. But in his day the angel of Democracy had arisen, enshadowing the classes with leathern wings, and proclaiming, 'All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas,' and so he was obliged to assert gentility, lest he slipped into the abyss where nothing counts, and the statements of Democracy are inaudible.

As he walked away from Wickham Place, his first care was to prove that he was as good as the Miss Schlegels. Obscurely wounded in his pride, he tried to wound them in return. They were probably not ladies. Would real ladies have asked him to tea? They were certainly ill-natured and cold. At each step his feeling of superiority increased. Would a real lady have talked about stealing an umbrella? Perhaps they were thieves after all, and if he had gone into the house they would have clapped a chloroformed handkerchief over his face. He walked on complacently as far as the Houses of Parliament. There an empty stomach asserted itself, and told him that he was a fool.

'Evening, Mr Bast.'

'Evening, Mr Dealtry.'

'Nice evening.'

'Evening.'

Mr Dealtry, a fellow clerk, passed on, and Leonard stood wondering whether he would take the tram as far as a penny would take him, or whether he would walk. He decided to walk—it is no good giving in, and he had spent money enough at Queen's Hall—and he walked over Westminster Bridge, in front of St Thomas's Hospital, and through the immense tunnel that passes under the South-Western main line at Vauxhall. In the tunnel he paused and listened to the roar of the trains. A sharp pain darted through his head, and he was conscious of the exact form of his eye sockets. He pushed on for another mile, and did not slacken speed until he stood at the entrance of a road called Camelia Road, which was at present his home.

Here he stopped again, and glanced suspiciously to right and left, like a rabbit that is going to bolt into its hole. A block of flats, constructed with extreme cheapness, towered on either hand. Further down the road two more blocks were being built, and beyond these an old house was being demolished to accommodate another pair. It was the kind of scene that may be observed all over London, whatever the locality—bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain, as the city receives more and more men upon her soil. Camelia Road would soon stand out like a fortress, and command, for a little, an extensive view. Only for a little.

Plans were out for the erection of flats in Magnolia Road also. And again a few years, and all the flats in either road might be pulled down, and new buildings, of a vastness at present unimaginable, might arise where they had fallen.

'Evening, Mr Bast.'

'Evening, Mr Cunningham.'

'Very serious thing this decline of the birth-rate in Manchester.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Very serious thing this decline of the birth-rate in Manchester,' repeated Mr Cunningham, tapping the Sunday paper in which the calamity in question had just been announced to him.

'Ah, yes,' said Leonard, who was not going to let on that he had not bought a Sunday paper.

'If this kind of thing goes on the population of England will be stationary in 1960.'

'You don't say so.'

'I call it a very serious thing, eh?'

'Good evening, Mr Cunningham.'

'Good evening, Mr Bast.'

Then Leonard entered Block B of the flats, and turned not upstairs, but down, into what is known to house-agents as a semi-basement, and to other men as a cellar. He opened the door, and cried 'Hullo!' with the pseudo-geniality of the Cockney. There was no reply. 'Hullo!' he repeated. The sitting-room was empty, though the electric light had been left burning. A look of relief came over his face, and he flung himself into the armchair.

The sitting-room contained, besides the armchair, two other chairs, a piano, a three-legged table and a cosy corner. Of the walls, one was occupied by the window, the other by a draped mantelshelf bristling with Cupids. Opposite the window was the door, and beside the door a bookcase, while over the piano there extended one of the masterpieces of Maude Goodman.[1] It was an amorous and not unpleasant little hole when the curtains were drawn, and the lights turned on, and the gas stove unlit. But it struck that shallow makeshift note that is so often heard in the modern dwelling-place. It had been too easily gained, and could be relinquished too easily.

As Leonard was kicking off his boots he jarred the three-legged table, and a photograph frame, honourably poised upon it, slid sideways, fell off into the fireplace, and smashed. He swore in a colourless sort of way, and picked the photograph up. It represented a young lady called Jacky, and had been taken at the time when young ladies called Jacky were often photographed with their mouths open. Teeth of dazzling whiteness extended along either of Jacky's jaws, and positively weighed her head sideways, so large were they and so numerous. Take my word for it, that smile was simply stunning, and it is only you and I who will be fastidious, and complain that true joy begins in the eyes, and that the eyes of Jacky did not accord with her smile, but were anxious and hungry.

Leonard tried to pull out the fragments of glass, and cut his fingers and swore again. A drop of blood fell on the frame, another followed, spilling over onto the exposed photograph. He swore more vigorously, and dashed into the kitchen, where he bathed his hands. The kitchen was the same size as the sitting-room; through it was a bedroom. This completed his home. He was renting the flat furnished: of all the objects that encumbered it none were his own except the photograph frame, the Cupids and the books.

'Damn, damn, damnation!' he murmured, together with such other words as he had learned from older men. Then he raised his hand to his forehead and said, 'Oh, damn it all—' which meant something different. He pulled himself together. He drank a little tea, black and silent, that still survived upon an upper shelf. He swallowed some dusty crumbs of a cake. Then he went back to the sitting-room, settled himself anew, and began to read a volume of Ruskin.

'Seven miles to the north of Venice—'

How perfectly the famous chapter opens! How supreme its command of admonition and of poetry! The rich man is speaking to us from his gondola.

'Seven miles to the north of Venice, the banks of sand, which nearer the city rise little above low-water mark, attain by degrees a higher level, and knit themselves at last into fields of salt morass, raised here and there into shapeless mounds, and intercepted by narrow creeks of sea.'

Leonard was trying to form his style on Ruskin: he understood him to be the greatest master of English Prose. He read forward steadily, occasionally making a few notes.

'Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession; and first (for of the shafts enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this church, its luminousness.'

Was there anything to be learned from this fine sentence? Could he adapt it to the needs of daily life? Could he introduce it, with modifications, when he next wrote a letter to his brother, the lay-reader? For example—

'Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession; and first (for of the absence of ventilation enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this flat, its obscurity.'

Something told him that the modifications would not do; and that something, had he known it, was the spirit of English Prose. 'My flat is dark as well as stuffy.' Those were the words for him.

And the voice in the gondola rolled on, piping melodiously of Effort and Self-Sacrifice, full of high purpose, full of beauty, full even of sympathy and the love of men, yet somehow eluding all that was actual and insistent in Leonard's life. For it was the voice of one who had never been dirty or hungry, and had not guessed successfully what dirt and hunger are.

Leonard listened to it with reverence. He felt that he was being done good to, and that if he kept on with

Ruskin, and the Queen's Hall concerts, and some pictures by Watts,[2] he would one day push his head out of the gray waters and see the universe. He believed in sudden conversion, a belief which may be right, but which is peculiarly attractive to a half-baked mind. It is the basis of much popular religion; in the domain of business it dominates the Stock Exchange, and becomes that 'bit of luck' by which all successes and failures are explained. 'If only I had a bit of luck, the whole thing would come straight … He's got a most magnificent place down at Streatham and a 20-h.p. Fiat, but then, mind you, he's had luck … I'm sorry the wife's so late, but she never has any luck over catching trains.' Leonard was superior to these people; he did believe in effort and in a steady preparation for the change that he desired. But of a heritage that may expand gradually he had no conception: he hoped to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist hopes to come to Jesus. Those Miss Schlegels had come to it; they had done the trick; their hands were upon the ropes, once and for all. And meanwhile his flat was dark as well as stuffy.

Presently there was a noise on the staircase. He shut up Margaret's card in the pages of Ruskin, and opened the door. A woman entered, of whom it is simplest to say that she was not respectable. Her appearance was awesome. She seemed all strings and bell-pulls—ribbons, chains, bead necklaces that clinked and caught—and a boa of azure feathers hung round her neck, with the ends uneven. Her throat was bare, wound with a double row of pearls, her arms were bare to the elbows, and might again be detected at the shoulder, through cheap lace. Her hat, which was flowery, resembled those punnets, covered with flannel, which we sowed with mustard and cress in our childhood, and which germinated here yes, and there no. She wore it on the back of her head. As for her hair, or rather hairs, they are too complicated to describe, but one system went down her back, lying in a thick pad there, while another, created for a lighter destiny, rippled around her forehead. The face—the face does not signify. It was the face of the photograph, but older, and the teeth were not so numerous as the photographer had suggested, and certainly not so white. Yes, Jacky was past her prime, whatever that prime may have been. She was descending quicker than most women into the colourless years, and the look in her eyes confessed it.

'What ho!' said Leonard, greeting the apparition with much spirit, and helping it off with its boa.

Jacky, in husky tones, replied, 'What ho!'

'Been out?' he asked. The question sounds superfluous, but it cannot have been really, for the lady answered, 'No,' adding, 'Oh, I am so tired.'

'You tired?'

'Eh?'

'I'm tired,' said he, hanging the boa up.

'Oh, Len, I am so tired.'

'I've been to that classical concert I told you about,' said Leonard.

'What's that?'

'I came back as soon as it was over.'

'Anyone been round to our place?' asked Jacky.

'Not that I've seen. I met Mr Cunningham outside, and we passed a few remarks.'

'What, not Mr Cunningham?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, you mean Mr Cunningham.'

'Yes. Mr Cunningham.'

'I've been out to tea at a lady-friend's.'

Her secret being at last given to the world, and the name of the lady-friend being even adumbrated, Jacky made no further experiments in the difficult and tiring art of conversation. She never had been a great talker. Even in her photographic days she had relied upon her smile and her figure to attract, and now that she was

On the shelf,

On the shelf,

Boys, boys, I'm on the shelf,

she was not likely to find her tongue. Occasional bursts of song (of which the above is an example) still issued from her lips, but the spoken word was rare.

She sat down on Leonard's knee, and began to fondle him. She was now a massive woman of thirty-three and her weight hurt him, but he could not very well say anything. Then she said, 'Is that a book you're reading?' and he said, 'That's a book,' and drew it from her unreluctant grasp. Margaret's card fell out of it. It fell face downwards, and he murmured: 'Book-marker.'

'Len—'

'What is it?' he asked, a little wearily, for she only had one topic of conversation when she sat upon his knee.

'You do love me?'

'Jacky, you know that I do. How can you ask such questions?'

'But you do love me, Len, don't you?'

'Of course I do.'

A pause. The other remark was still due.

‘Len—’

‘Well? What is it?’

‘Len, you will make it all right?’

‘I can’t have you ask me that again,’ said the boy, flaring up into a sudden passion. ‘I’ve promised to marry you when I’m of age, and that’s enough. My word’s my word. I’ve promised to marry you as soon as ever I’m twenty-one, and I can’t keep on being worried. I’ve worries enough. It isn’t likely I’d throw you over, let alone my word, when I’ve spent all this money. Besides, I’m an Englishman, and I never go back on my word. Jacky, do be reasonable. Of course I’ll marry you. Only do stop badgering me.’

‘When’s your birthday, Len?’

‘I’ve told you again and again, the eleventh of November next. Now get off my knee a bit; someone must get supper, I suppose.’

Jacky went through to the bedroom, and began to see to her hat. This meant blowing at it with short sharp puffs. Leonard tidied up the sitting-room, and began to prepare their evening meal. He put a penny into the slot of the gas-meter, and soon the flat was reeking with metallic fumes. Somehow he could not recover his temper, and all the time he was cooking he continued to complain bitterly.

‘It really is too bad when a fellow isn’t trusted. It makes one feel so wild, when I’ve pretended to the people here that you’re my wife—all right, all right, you *shall* be my wife—and I’ve bought you the ring to wear, and I’ve taken this flat furnished, and it’s far more than I can afford, and yet you aren’t content, and I’ve also not told the truth when I’ve written home.’ He lowered his voice. ‘He’d stop it.’ In a tone of horror, that was a little luxurious, he repeated: ‘My brother’d stop it. I’m going against the whole world, Jacky.

‘That’s what I am, Jacky. I don’t take any heed of what anyone says. I just go straight forward, I do. That’s always been my way. I’m not one of your weak knock-kneed chaps. If a woman’s in trouble, I don’t leave her in the lurch. That’s not my street. No, thank you.

‘I’ll tell you another thing too. I care a good deal about improving myself by means of Literature and Art, and so getting a wider outlook. For instance, when you came in I was reading Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*. I don’t say this to boast, but just to show you the kind of man I am. I can tell you, I enjoyed that classical concert this afternoon.’

To all his moods Jacky remained equally indifferent. When supper was ready—and not before—she emerged from the bedroom, saying: ‘But you do love me, don’t you?’

They began with a soup square, which Leonard had just dissolved in some hot water. It was followed by the tongue—a freckled cylinder of meat, with a little jelly at the top, and a great deal of yellow fat at the bottom—ending with another square dissolved in water (jelly: pineapple), which Leonard had prepared earlier in the day. Jacky ate contentedly enough, occasionally looking at her man with those anxious eyes, to which nothing else in her appearance corresponded, and which yet seemed to mirror her soul. And Leonard managed to convince his stomach that it was having a nourishing meal.

After supper they smoked cigarettes and exchanged a few statements. She observed that her ‘likeness’ had been broken. He found occasion to remark, for the second time, that he had come straight back home after the concert at Queen’s Hall. Presently she sat upon his knee. The inhabitants of Camelia Road tramped to and fro outside the window, just on a level with their heads, and the family in the flat on the ground floor began to sing ‘Hark, my soul, it is the Lord’.

‘That tune fairly gives me the hump,’ said Leonard.

Jacky followed this, and said that, for her part, she thought it a lovely tune.

‘No; I’ll play you something lovely. Get up, dear, for a minute.’

He went to the piano and jingled out a little Grieg. He played badly and vulgarly, but the performance was not without its effect, for Jacky said she thought she’d be going to bed. As she receded, a new set of interests possessed the boy, and he began to think of what had been said about music by that odd Miss Schlegel—the one that twisted her face about so when she spoke. Then the thoughts grew sad and envious. There was the girl named Helen, who had pinched his umbrella, and the German girl who had smiled at him pleasantly, and Herr someone, and Aunt someone, and the brother—all, all with their hands on the ropes. They had all passed up that narrow rich staircase at Wickham Place, to some ample room, whither he would never follow them, not if he read for ten hours a day. Oh, it was no good, this continual aspiration. Some are born cultured; the rest had better go in for whatever comes easy. To see life steadily and to see it whole[3] was not for the likes of him.

From the darkness beyond the kitchen a voice called, ‘Len?’

‘You in bed?’ he asked, his forehead twitching.

‘M’m.’

‘All right.’

Presently she called him again.

‘I must clean my boots ready for the morning,’ he answered.

Presently she called him again.

‘I rather want to get this chapter done.’

‘What?’

He closed his ears against her.

‘What’s that?’

‘All right, Jacky, nothing; I’m reading a book.’

'What?'

'What?' he answered, catching her degraded deafness.

Presently she called him again.

Ruskin had visited Torcello by this time, and was ordering his gondoliers to take him to Murano. It occurred to him, as he glided over the whispering lagoons, that the power of Nature could not be shortened by the folly, nor her beauty altogether saddened by the misery, of such as Leonard.

VII

'Oh, Margaret,' cried her aunt next morning, 'such a most unfortunate thing has happened. I could not get you alone.'

The most unfortunate thing was not very serious. One of the flats in the ornate block opposite had been taken furnished by the Wilcox family, 'coming up, no doubt, in the hope of getting into London society'. That Mrs Munt should be the first to discover the misfortune was not remarkable, for she was so interested in the flats that she watched their every mutation with unwearying care. In theory she despised them—they took away that old-world look—they cut off the sun—flats house a flashy type of person. But, if the truth had been known, she found her visits to Wickham Place twice as amusing since Wickham Mansions had arisen, and would in a couple of days learn more about them than her nieces in a couple of months, or her nephew in a couple of years. She would stroll across and make friends with the porters, and inquire what the rents were, exclaiming for example: 'What! A hundred and twenty for a basement? You'll never get it!' And they would answer: 'One can but try, madam.' The passenger lifts, the provision lifts, the arrangement for coals (a great temptation for a dishonest porter), were all familiar matters to her, and perhaps a relief from the politico-economical-aesthetic atmosphere that reigned at the Schlegels'.

Margaret received the information calmly, and did not agree that it would throw a cloud over poor Helen's life.

'Oh, but Helen isn't a girl with no interests,' she exclaimed. 'She has plenty of other things and other people to think about. She made a false start with the Wilcoxes, and she'll be as willing as we are to have nothing more to do with them.'

'For a clever girl, dear, how very oddly you do talk. Helen'll *have* to have something more to do with them, now that they're all opposite. She may meet that Paul in the street. She cannot very well not bow.'

'Of course she must bow. But look here; let's do the flowers. I was going to say, the will to be interested in him has died, and what else matters? I look on that disastrous episode (over which you were so kind) as the killing of a nerve in Helen. It's dead, and she'll never be troubled with it again. The only things that matter are the things that interest one. Bowing, even calling and leaving cards, even a dinner-party—we can do all those things to the Wilcoxes, if they find it agreeable; but the other thing, the one important thing—never again. Don't you see?'

Mrs Munt did not see, and indeed Margaret was making a most questionable statement—that any emotion, any interest, once vividly aroused, can wholly die.

'I also have the honour to inform you that the Wilcoxes are bored with us. I didn't tell you at the time—it might have made you angry, and you had enough to worry you—but I wrote a letter to Mrs W., and apologized for the trouble that Helen had given them. She didn't answer it.'

'How very rude!'

'I wonder. Or was it sensible?'

'No, Margaret, most rude.'

'In either case one can class it as reassuring.'

Mrs Munt sighed. She was going back to Swanage on the morrow, just as her nieces were wanting her most. Other regrets crowded upon her: for instance, how magnificently she would have cut Charles if she had met him face to face. She had already seen him, giving an order to the porter—and very common he looked in a tall hat. But unfortunately his back was turned to her, and though she had cut his back she could not regard this as a telling snub.

'But you will be careful, won't you?' she exhorted.

'Oh, certainly. Fiendishly careful.'

'And Helen must be careful, too.'

'Careful over what?' cried Helen, at that moment coming into the room with her cousin.

'Nothing,' said Margaret, seized with a momentary awkwardness.

'Careful over what, Aunt Juley?'

Mrs Munt assumed a cryptic air. 'It is only that a certain family, whom we know by name but do not mention, as you said yourself last night after the concert, have taken the flat opposite from the Mathesons—where the plants are in the balcony.'

Helen began some laughing reply, and then disconcerted them all by blushing. Mrs Munt was so disconcerted that she exclaimed, 'What Helen, you don't mind them coming, do you?' and deepened the blush to crimson.

‘Of course I don’t mind,’ said Helen a little crossly. ‘It is that you and Meg are both so absurdly grave about it, when there’s nothing to be grave about at all.’

‘I’m not grave,’ protested Margaret, a little cross in her turn.

‘Well, you look grave; doesn’t she, Frieda?’

‘I don’t feel grave, that’s all I can say; you’re going quite on the wrong tack.’

‘No, she does not feel grave,’ echoed Mrs Munt. ‘I can bear witness to that. She disagrees—’

‘Hark!’ interrupted Fräulein Mosebach. ‘I hear Bruno entering the hall.’

For Herr Liesecke was due at Wickham Place to call for the two younger girls. He was not entering the hall—in fact, he did not enter it for quite five minutes. But Frieda detected a delicate situation, and said that she and Helen had much better wait for Bruno down below, and leave Margaret and Mrs Munt to finish arranging the flowers. Helen acquiesced. But, as if to prove that the situation was not delicate really, she stopped in the doorway and said:

‘Did you say the Mathesons’ flat, Aunt Juley? How wonderful you are! *I* never knew that the woman who laced too tightly’s name was Matheson.’

‘Come, Helen,’ said her cousin.

‘Go, Helen,’ said her aunt; and continued to Margaret almost in the same breath: ‘Helen cannot deceive me. She does mind.’

‘Oh, hush!’ breathed Margaret. ‘Frieda’ll hear you, and she can be so tiresome.’

‘She minds,’ persisted Mrs Munt, moving thoughtfully about the room, and pulling the dead chrysanthemums out of the vases. ‘I knew she’d mind—and I’m sure a girl ought to! Such an experience! Such awful coarse-grained people! I know more about them than you do, which you forget, and if Charles had taken *you* that motor drive—well, you’d have reached the house a perfect wreck. Oh, Margaret, you don’t know what you are in for. They’re all bottled up against the drawing-room window. There’s Mrs Wilcox—I’ve seen her. There’s Paul. There’s Evie, who is a minx. There’s Charles—I saw him to start with. And who would an elderly man with a moustache and a copper-coloured face be?’

‘Mr Wilcox, possibly.’

‘I knew it. And there’s Mr Wilcox.’

‘It’s a shame to call his face copper colour,’ complained Margaret. ‘He has a remarkably good complexion for a man of his age.’

Mrs Munt, triumphant elsewhere, could afford to concede Mr Wilcox his complexion. She passed on from it to the plan of campaign that her nieces should pursue in the future. Margaret tried to stop her.

‘Helen did not take the news quite as I expected, but the Wilcox nerve is dead in her really, so there’s no need for plans.’

‘It’s as well to be prepared.’

‘No—it’s as well not to be prepared.’

‘Why?’

‘Because—’

Her thought drew being from the obscure borderland. She could not explain in so many words, but she felt that those who prepare for all the emergencies of life beforehand may equip themselves at the expense of joy. It is necessary to prepare for an examination, or a dinner-party, or a possible fall in the price of stock; those who attempt human relations must adopt another method, or fail. ‘Because I’d sooner risk it,’ was her lame conclusion.

‘But imagine the evenings,’ exclaimed her aunt, pointing to the Mansions with the spout of the watering-can. ‘Turn the electric light on here or there, and it’s almost the same room. One evening they may forget to draw their blinds down, and you’ll see them; and the next, you yours, and they’ll see you. Impossible to sit out on the balconies. Impossible to water the plants, or even speak. Imagine going out of the front door, and they come out opposite at the same moment. And yet you tell me that plans are unnecessary, and you’d rather risk it.’

‘I hope to risk things all my life.’

‘Oh, Margaret, most dangerous.’

‘But after all,’ she continued with a smile, ‘there’s never any great risk as long as you have money.’

‘Oh, shame! What a shocking speech!’

‘Money pads the edges of things,’ said Miss Schlegel. ‘God help those who have none.’

‘But this is something quite new!’ said Mrs Munt, who collected new ideas as a squirrel collects nuts, and was especially attracted by those that are portable.

‘New for me; sensible people have acknowledged it for years. You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. It is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence. It’s only when we see someone near us tottering that we realize all that an independent income means. Last night, when we were talking up here round the fire, I began to think that the very soul of the world is economic, and that the lowest abyss is not the absence of love, but the absence of coin.’

‘I call that rather cynical.’

‘So do I. But Helen and I, we ought to remember, when we are tempted to criticize others, that we are standing on these islands, and that most of the others are down below the surface of the sea. The poor cannot always reach those whom they want to love, and they can hardly ever escape from those whom they love no longer. We rich can. Imagine the tragedy last June if Helen and Paul Wilcox had been poor people, and couldn’t invoke railways

and motor-cars to part them.'

'That's more like socialism,' said Mrs Munt suspiciously.

'Call it what you like. I call it going through life with one's hand spread open on the table. I'm tired of these rich people who pretend to be poor, and think it shows a nice mind to ignore the piles of money that keep their feet above the waves. I stand each year upon six hundred pounds, and Helen upon the same, and Tibby will stand upon eight, and as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed—from the sea, yes, from the sea. And all our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders, and all our speeches; and because we don't want to steal umbrellas ourselves we forget that below the sea people do want to steal them, and do steal them sometimes, and that what's a joke up here is down there reality—'

'There they go—there goes Fräulein Mosebach. Really, for a German she does dress charmingly. Oh—!'

'What is it?'

'Helen was looking up at the Wilcoxes' flat.'

'Why shouldn't she?'

'I beg your pardon, I interrupted you. What was it you were saying about reality?'

'I had worked round to myself, as usual,' answered Margaret in tones that were suddenly preoccupied.

'Do tell me this, at all events. Are you for the rich or for the poor?'

'Too difficult. Ask me another. Am I for poverty or for riches? For riches. Hurrah for riches!'

'For riches!' echoed Mrs Munt, having, as it were, at last secured her nut.

'Yes. For riches. Money for ever!'

'So am I, and so, I am afraid, are most of my acquaintances at Swanage, but I am surprised that you agree with us.'

'Thank you so much, Aunt Juley. While I have talked theories, you have done the flowers.'

'Not at all, dear. I wish you would let me help you in more important things.'

'Well, would you be very kind? Would you come round with me to the registry office?[1] There's a housemaid who won't say yes but doesn't say no.'

On their way thither they too looked up at the Wilcoxes' flat. Evie was in the balcony, 'staring most rudely' according to Mrs Munt. Oh yes, it was a nuisance, there was no doubt of it. Helen was proof against a passing encounter, but—Margaret began to lose confidence. Might it reawake the dying nerve if the family were living close against her eyes? And Frieda Mosebach was stopping with them for another fortnight, and Frieda was sharp, abominably sharp, and quite capable of remarking, 'You love one of the young gentlemen opposite, yes?' The remark would be untrue, but of the kind which, if stated often enough, may become true; just as the remark 'England and Germany are bound to fight' renders war a little more likely each time that it is made, and is therefore made the more readily by the gutter press of either nation. Have the private emotions also their gutter press? Margaret thought so, and feared that good Aunt Juley and Frieda were typical specimens of it. They might, by continual chatter, lead Helen into a repetition of the desires of June. Into a repetition—they could not do more; they could not lead her into lasting love. They were—she saw it clearly—journalism; her father, with all his defects and wrong-headedness, had been Literature, and had he lived he would have persuaded his daughter rightly.

The registry office was holding its morning reception. A string of carriages filled the street. Miss Schlegel waited her turn, and finally had to be content with an insidious 'temporary', being rejected by genuine housemaids on the ground of her numerous stairs. Her failure depressed her, and though she forgot the failure the depression remained. On her way home she again glanced up at the Wilcoxes' flat, and took the rather matronly step of speaking about the matter to Helen.

'Helen, you must tell me whether this thing worries you.'

'If what?' said Helen, who was washing her hands for lunch.

'The W.s' coming.'

'No, of course not.'

'Really?'

'Really.' Then she admitted that she was a little worried on Mrs Wilcox's account; she implied that Mrs Wilcox might reach backward into deep feelings, and be pained by things that never touched the other members of that clan. 'I shan't mind if Paul points at our house and says, "There lives the girl who tried to catch me." But she might.'

'If even that worries you, we could arrange something. There's no reason we should be near people who displease us or whom we displease, thanks to our money. We might even go away for a little.'

'Well, I am going away. Frieda's just asked me to Stettin, and I shan't be back till after the New Year. Will that do? Or must I fly the country altogether? Really, Meg, what has come over you to make such a fuss?'

'Oh, I'm getting an old maid, I suppose. I thought I minded nothing, but really I—I should be bored if you fell in love with the same man twice and'—she cleared her throat—'you did go red, you know, when Aunt Juley attacked you this morning. I shouldn't have referred to it otherwise.'

But Helen's laugh rang true, as she raised a soapy hand to heaven and swore that never, nowhere and nohow would she again fall in love with any of the Wilcox family, down to its remotest collaterals.

VIII

The friendship between Margaret and Mrs Wilcox, which was to develop so quickly and with such strange results, may perhaps have had its beginnings at Speyer, in the spring. Perhaps the elder lady, as she gazed at the vulgar, ruddy cathedral, and listened to the talk of Helen and her husband, may have detected in the other and less charming of the sisters a deeper sympathy, a sounder judgement. She was capable of detecting such things. Perhaps it was she who had desired the Miss Schlegels to be invited to Howards End, and Margaret whose presence she had particularly desired. All this is speculation: Mrs Wilcox has left few clear indications behind her. It is certain that she came to call at Wickham Place a fortnight later,[1] the very day that Helen was going with her cousin to Stettin.

'Helen!' cried Fräulein Mosebach in awestruck tones (she was now in her cousin's confidence)—'his mother has forgiven you!' And then, remembering that in England the newcomer ought not to call before she is called upon, she changed her tone from awe to disapproval, and opined that Mrs Wilcox was 'keine Dame'.[2]

'Bother the whole family!' snapped Margaret. 'Helen, stop giggling and pirouetting, and go and finish your packing. Why can't the woman leave us alone?'

'I don't know what I shall do with Meg,' Helen retorted, collapsing upon the stairs. 'She's got Wilcox and Box[3] upon the brain. Meg, Meg, I don't love the young genterman; I don't love the young genterman, Meg, Meg. Can a body speak plainer?'

'Most certainly her love has died,' asserted Fräulein Mosebach.

'Most certainly it has, Frieda, but that will not prevent me from being bored with the Wilcoxes if I return the call.'

Then Helen simulated tears, and Fräulein Mosebach, who thought her extremely amusing, did the same. 'Oh, boo hoo! Boo hoo hoo! Meg's going to return the call, and I can't. 'Cos why? 'Cos I'm going to German-eye.'

'If you are going to Germany, go and pack; if you aren't, go and call on the Wilcoxes instead of me.'

'But, Meg, Meg, I don't love the young genterman; I don't love the young—O lud, who's that coming down the stairs? I vow 'tis my brother. O crimini!'

A male—even such a male as Tibby—was enough to stop the foolery. The barrier of sex, though decreasing among the civilized, is still high, and higher on the side of women. Helen could tell her sister all, and her cousin much, about Paul; she told her brother nothing. It was not prudishness, for she now spoke of 'the Wilcox ideal' with laughter, and even with a growing brutality. Nor was it precaution, for Tibby seldom repeated any news that did not concern himself. It was rather the feeling that she betrayed a secret into the camp of men, and that, however trivial it was on this side of the barrier, it would become important on that. So she stopped, or rather began to fool on other subjects, until her long-suffering relatives drove her upstairs. Fräulein Mosebach followed her, but lingered to say heavily over the banisters to Margaret, 'It is all right—she does not love the young man—he has not been worthy of her.'

'Yes, I know; thanks very much.'

'I thought I did right to tell you.'

'Ever so many thanks.'

'What's that?' asked Tibby. No one told him, and he proceeded into the dining-room, to eat Elvas plums.

That evening Margaret took decisive action. The house was very quiet, and the fog—we are in November now—pressed against the windows like an excluded ghost. Frieda and Helen and all their luggages had gone. Tibby, who was not feeling well, lay stretched on a sofa by the fire. Margaret sat by him, thinking. Her mind darted from impulse to impulse, and finally marshalled them all in review. The practical person, who knows what he wants at once, and generally knows nothing else, will accuse her of indecision. But this was the way her mind worked. And when she did act no one could accuse her of indecision then. She hit out as lustily as if she had not considered the matter at all. The letter that she wrote Mrs Wilcox glowed with the native hue of resolution. The pale cast of thought[4] was with her a breath rather than a tarnish, a breath that leaves the colours all the more vivid when it has been wiped away.

Dear Mrs Wilcox,

I have to write something discourteous. It would be better if we did not meet. Both my sister and my aunt have given displeasure to your family, and, in my sister's case, the grounds for displeasure might recur. As far as I know, she no longer occupies her thoughts with your son. But it would not be fair, either to her or to you, if they met, and it is therefore right that our acquaintance, which began so pleasantly, should end.

I fear that you will not agree with this; indeed, I know that you will not, since you have been good enough to call on us. It is only an instinct on my part, and no doubt the instinct is wrong. My sister would, undoubtedly, say that it is wrong. I write without her knowledge, and I hope that you will not associate her with my discourtesy.

Believe me,

Yours truly,

M. J. Schlegel.

Margaret sent this letter round by the post. Next morning she received the following reply by hand:

Dear Miss Schlegel,

You should not have written me such a letter. I called to tell you that Paul has gone abroad.

Ruth Wilcox.

Margaret's cheeks burned. She could not finish her breakfast. She was on fire with shame. Helen had told her that the youth was leaving England, but other things had seemed more important, and she had forgotten. All her absurd anxieties fell to the ground, and in their place arose the certainty that she had been rude to Mrs Wilcox. Rudeness affected Margaret like a bitter taste in the mouth. It poisoned life. At times it is necessary, but woe to those who employ it without due need. She flung on a hat and shawl, just like a poor woman, and plunged into the fog, which still continued. Her lips were compressed, the letter remained in her hand, and in this state she crossed the street, entered the marble vestibule of the flats, eluded the concierges, and ran up the stairs till she reached the second floor.

She sent in her name, and to her surprise was shown straight into Mrs Wilcox's bedroom.

'Oh, Mrs Wilcox, I have made the baddest blunder. I am more, more ashamed and sorry than I can say.'

Mrs Wilcox bowed gravely. She was offended, and did not pretend to the contrary. She was sitting up in bed, writing letters on an invalid-table that spanned her knees. A breakfast-tray was on another table beside her. The light of the fire, the light from the window, and the light of a candle-lamp, which threw a quivering halo round her hands, combined to create a strange atmosphere of dissolution.

'I knew he was going to India in November, but I forgot.'

'He sailed on the seventeenth for Nigeria, in Africa.'

'I knew—I know. I have been too absurd all through. I am very much ashamed.'

Mrs Wilcox did not answer.

'I am more sorry than I can say, and I hope that you will forgive me.'

'It doesn't matter, Miss Schlegel. It is good of you to have come round so promptly.'

'It does matter,' cried Margaret. 'I have been rude to you; and my sister is not even at home, so there was not even that excuse.'

'Indeed?'

'She has just gone to Germany.'

'She gone as well,' murmured the other. 'Yes, certainly, it is quite safe—safe, absolutely, now.'

'You've been worrying too!' exclaimed Margaret, getting more and more excited, and taking a chair without invitation. 'How perfectly extraordinary! I can see that you have. You felt as I do: Helen mustn't meet him again.'

'I did think it best.'

'Now why?'

'That's a most difficult question,' said Mrs Wilcox, smiling, and a little losing her expression of annoyance. 'I think you put it best in your letter—it was an instinct, which may be wrong.'

'It wasn't that your son still—'

'Oh no; he often—my Paul is very young, you see.'

'Then what was it?'

She repeated: 'An instinct which may be wrong.'

'In other words, they belong to types that can fall in love, but couldn't live together. That's dreadfully probable. I'm afraid that in nine cases out of ten Nature pulls one way and human nature another.'

'These are indeed "other words",' said Mrs Wilcox. 'I had nothing so coherent in my head. I was merely alarmed when I knew that my boy cared for your sister.'

'Ah, I have always been wanting to ask you. How *did* you know? Helen was so surprised when our aunt drove up, and you stepped forward and arranged things. Did Paul tell you?'

'There is nothing to be gained by discussing that,' said Mrs Wilcox after a moment's pause.

'Mrs Wilcox, were you very angry with us last June? I wrote you a letter and you didn't answer it.'

'I was certainly against taking Mrs Matheson's flat. I knew it was opposite your house.'

'But it's all right now?'

'I think so.'

'You only think? You aren't sure? I do love these little muddles tidied up.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure,' said Mrs Wilcox, moving with uneasiness beneath the clothes. 'I always sound uncertain over things. It is my way of speaking.'

'That's all right, and I'm sure too.'

Here the maid came in to remove the breakfast-tray. They were interrupted, and when they resumed conversation it was on more normal lines.

'I must say good-bye now—you will be getting up.'

'No—please stop a little longer—I am taking a day in bed. Now and then I do.'

'I thought of you as one of the early risers.'

'At Howards End—yes; there is nothing to get up for in London.'

‘Nothing to get up for?’ cried the scandalized Margaret. ‘When there are all the autumn exhibitions, and Ysaye5 playing in the afternoon! Not to mention people.’

‘The truth is, I am a little tired. First came the wedding, and then Paul went off, and, instead of resting yesterday, I paid a round of calls.’

‘A wedding?’

‘Yes; Charles, my elder son, is married.’

‘Indeed!’

‘We took the flat chiefly on that account, and also that Paul could get his African outfit. The flat belongs to a cousin of my husband’s, and she most kindly offered it to us. So before the day came we were able to make the acquaintance of Dolly’s people, which we had not yet done.’

Margaret asked who Dolly’s people were.

‘Fussell. The father is in the Indian Army—retired; the brother is in the Army. The mother is dead.’

So perhaps these were the ‘chinless sunburnt men’ whom Helen had espied one afternoon through the window. Margaret felt mildly interested in the fortunes of the Wilcox family. She had acquired the habit on Helen’s account, and it still clung to her. She asked for more information about Miss Dolly Fussell that was, and was given it in even, unemotional tones. Mrs Wilcox’s voice, though sweet and compelling, had little range of expression. It suggested that pictures, concerts and people are all of small and equal value. Only once had it quickened—when speaking of Howards End.

‘Charles and Albert Fussell have known one another some time. They belong to the same club, and are both devoted to golf. Dolly plays golf too, though I believe not so well, and they first met in a mixed foursome. We all like her, and are very much pleased. They were married on the eleventh, a few days before Paul sailed. Charles was very anxious to have his brother as best man, so he made a great point of having it on the eleventh. The Fussells would have preferred it after Christmas, but they were very nice about it. There is Dolly’s photograph—in that double frame.’

‘Are you quite certain that I’m not interrupting, Mrs Wilcox?’

‘Yes, quite.’

‘Then I will stay. I’m enjoying this.’

Dolly’s photograph was now examined. It was signed ‘For dear Mims’, which Mrs Wilcox interpreted as ‘the name she and Charles had settled that she should call me’. Dolly looked silly, and had one of those triangular faces that so often prove attractive to a robust man. She was very pretty. From her Margaret passed to Charles, whose features prevailed opposite. She speculated on the forces that had drawn the two together till God parted them. She found time to hope that they would be happy.

‘They have gone to Naples for their honeymoon.’

‘Lucky people!’

‘I can hardly imagine Charles in Italy.’

‘Doesn’t he care for travelling?’

‘He likes travel, but he does see through foreigners so. What he enjoys most is a motor tour in England, and I think that would have carried the day if the weather had not been so abominable. His father gave him a car of his own for a wedding present, which for the present is being stored at Howards End.’

‘I suppose you have a garage there?’

‘Yes. My husband built a little one only last month, to the west of the house, not far from the wych-elm, in what used to be the paddock for the pony.’

The last words had an indescribable ring about them.

‘Where’s the pony gone?’ asked Margaret after a pause.

‘The pony? Oh, dead, ever so long ago.’

‘The wych-elm I remember. Helen spoke of it as a very splendid tree.’

‘It is the finest wych-elm in Hertfordshire. Did your sister tell you about the teeth?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, it might interest you. There are pig’s teeth stuck into the trunk, about four feet from the ground. The country people put them in long ago, and they think that if they chew a piece of the bark it will cure the toothache. The teeth are almost grown over now, and no one comes to the tree.’

‘I should. I love folklore and all festering superstitions.’

‘Do you think that the tree really did cure toothache, if one believed in it?’

‘Of course it did. It would cure anything—once.’

‘Certainly I remember cases—you see, I lived at Howards End long, long before Mr Wilcox knew it. I was born there.’

The conversation again shifted. At the time it seemed little more than aimless chatter. She was interested when her hostess explained that Howards End was her own property. She was bored when too minute an account was given of the Fussell family, of the anxieties of Charles concerning Naples, of the movements of Mr Wilcox and Evie, who were motoring in Yorkshire. Margaret could not bear being bored. She grew inattentive, played with the photograph frame, dropped it, smashed Dolly’s glass, apologized, was pardoned, cut her finger thereon, was pitied, and finally said she must be going—there was all the housekeeping to do, and she had to interview Tibby’s riding-master.

Then the curious note was struck again.

'Good-bye, Miss Schlegel, good-bye. Thank you for coming. You have cheered me up.'

'I'm so glad!'

'I—I wonder whether you ever think about yourself.'

'I think of nothing else,' said Margaret, blushing, but letting her hand remain in that of the invalid.

'I wonder. I wondered at Heidelberg.'

'I'm sure!'

'I almost think—'

'Yes?' asked Margaret, for there was a long pause—a pause that was somehow akin to the flicker of the fire, the quiver of the reading-lamp upon their hands, the white blur from the window; a pause of shifting and eternal shadows.

'I almost think you forget you're a girl.'

Margaret was startled and a little annoyed. 'I'm twenty-nine,' she remarked. 'That's not so wildly girlish.'

Mrs Wilcox smiled.

'What makes you say that? Do you mean that I have been gauche and rude?'

A shake of the head. 'I only meant that I am fifty-one, and that to me both of you—read it all in some book or other; I cannot put things clearly.'

'Oh, I've got it—inexperience. I'm no better than Helen, you mean, and yet I presume to advise her.'

'Yes. You have got it. Inexperience is the word.'

'Inexperience,' repeated Margaret, in serious yet buoyant tones. 'Of course, I have everything to learn—absolutely everything—just as much as Helen. Life's very difficult and full of surprises. At all events, I've got as far as that. To be humble and kind, to go straight ahead, to love people rather than pity them, to remember the submerged—well, one can't do all these things at once, worse luck, because they're so contradictory. It's then that proportion comes in—to live by proportion. Don't *begin* with proportion. Only prigs do that. Let proportion come in as a last resource, when the better things have failed, and a deadlock—gracious me, I've started preaching!'

'Indeed, you put the difficulties of life splendidly,' said Mrs Wilcox, withdrawing her hand into the deeper shadows. 'It is just what I should have liked to say about them myself.'

IX

Mrs Wilcox cannot be accused of giving Margaret much information about life. And Margaret, on the other hand, has made a fair show of modesty, and has pretended to an inexperience that she certainly did not feel. She had kept house for over ten years; she had entertained, almost with distinction; she had brought up a charming sister, and was bringing up a brother. Surely, if experience is attainable, she had attained it.

Yet the little luncheon party that she gave in Mrs Wilcox's honour was not a success. The new friend did not blend with the 'one or two delightful people' who had been asked to meet her, and the atmosphere was one of polite bewilderment. Her tastes were simple, her knowledge of culture slight, and she was not interested in the New English Art Club,[1] nor in the dividing-line between Journalism and Literature, which was started as a conversational hare. The delightful people darted after it with cries of joy, Margaret leading them, and not till the meal was half over did they realize that the principal guest had taken no part in the chase. There was no common topic. Mrs Wilcox, whose life had been spent in the service of husband and sons, had little to say to strangers who had never shared it, and whose age was half her own. Clever talk alarmed her, and withered her delicate imaginings; it was the social counterpart of a motor-car, all jerks, and she was a wisp of hay, a flower. Twice she deplored the weather, twice criticized the train service on the Great Northern Railway. They vigorously assented, and rushed on, and when she inquired whether there was any news of Helen her hostess was too much occupied in placing Rothenstein[2] to answer. The question was repeated: 'I hope that your sister is safe in Germany by now.' Margaret checked herself and said: 'Yes, thank you; I heard on Tuesday.' But the demon of vociferation was in her, and the next moment she was off again.

'Only on Tuesday, for they live right away at Stettin. Did you ever know anyone living at Stettin?'[3]

'Never,' said Mrs Wilcox gravely, while her neighbour, a young man low down in the Education Office, began to discuss what people who lived at Stettin ought to look like. Was there such a thing as Stettininity? Margaret swept on.

'People at Stettin drop things into boats out of overhanging warehouses. At least, our cousins do, but aren't particularly rich. The town isn't interesting, except for a clock that rolls its eyes, and the view of the Oder, which truly is something special. Oh, Mrs Wilcox, you would love the Oder! The river, or rather rivers—there seem to be dozens of them—are intense blue, and the plain they run through an intensest green.'

'Indeed! That sounds like a most beautiful view, Miss Schlegel.'

'So I say, but Helen, who will muddle things, says no, it's like music. The course of the Oder is to be like music. It's obliged to remind her of a symphonic poem. The part by the landing-stage is in B minor, if I remember rightly,

but lower down things get extremely mixed. There is a slodgy theme in several keys at once, meaning mud-banks, and another for the navigable canal, and the exit into the Baltic is in C sharp major, pianissimo.'

'What do the overhanging warehouses make of that?' asked the man, laughing.

'They make a great deal of it,' replied Margaret, unexpectedly rushing off on a new track. 'I think it's affectation to compare the Oder to music, and so do you, but the overhanging warehouses of Stettin take beauty seriously, which we don't, and the average Englishman doesn't, and despises all who do. Now don't say "Germans have no taste" or I shall scream. They haven't. But—but—such a tremendous but!—they take poetry seriously. They do take poetry seriously.'

'Is anything gained by that?'

'Yes, yes. The German is always on the lookout for beauty. He may miss it through stupidity, or misinterpret it, but he is always asking beauty to enter his life, and I believe that in the end it will come. At Heidelberg I met a fat veterinary surgeon whose voice broke with sobs as he repeated some mawkish poetry. So easy for me to laugh—I, who never repeat poetry, good or bad, and cannot remember one fragment of verse to thrill myself with. My blood boils—well, I'm half German, so put it down to patriotism—when I listen to the tasteful contempt of the average islander for things Teutonic, whether they're Böcklin[4] or my veterinary surgeon. "Oh, Böcklin," they say; "he strains after beauty, he peoples Nature with gods too consciously." Of course Böcklin strains, because he wants something—beauty and all the other intangible gifts that are floating about the world. So his landscapes don't come off, and Leader's[5] do.'

'I am not sure that I agree. Do you?' said he, turning to Mrs Wilcox.

She replied: 'I think Miss Schlegel puts everything splendidly'; and a chill fell on the conversation.

'Oh, Mrs Wilcox, say something nicer than that. It's such a snub to be told you put things splendidly.'

'I do not mean it as a snub. Your last speech interested me so much. Generally people do not seem quite to like Germany. I have long wanted to hear what is said on the other side.'

'The other side? Then you do disagree. Oh, good! Give us your side.'

'I have no side. But my husband'—her voice softened, the chill increased—'has very little faith in the Continent, and our children have all taken after him.'

'On what grounds? Do they feel that the Continent is in bad form?'

Mrs Wilcox had no idea; she paid little attention to grounds. She was not intellectual, nor even alert, and it was odd that, all the same, she should give the idea of greatness. Margaret, zigzagging with her friends over Thought and Art, was conscious of a personality that transcended their own and dwarfed their activities. There was no bitterness in Mrs Wilcox; there was not even criticism; she was lovable, and no ungracious or uncharitable word had passed her lips. Yet she and daily life were out of focus: one or the other must show blurred. And at lunch she seemed more out of focus than usual, and nearer the line that divides daily life from a life that may be of greater importance.

'You will admit, though, that the Continent—it seems silly to speak of "the Continent", but really it is all more like itself than any part of it is like England. England is unique. Do have another jelly first. I was going to say that the Continent, for good or for evil, is interested in ideas. Its literature and art have what one might call the kink of the unseen about them, and this persists even through decadence and affectation. There is more liberty of action in England, but for liberty of thought go to bureaucratic Prussia. People will there discuss with humility vital questions that we here think ourselves too good to touch with tongs.'

'I do not want to go to Prussia,' said Mrs Wilcox—'not even to see that interesting view that you were describing. And for discussing with humility I am too old. We never discuss anything at Howards End.'

'Then you ought to!' said Margaret. 'Discussion keeps a house alive. It cannot stand by bricks and mortar alone.'

'It cannot stand without them,' said Mrs Wilcox, unexpectedly catching on to the thought, and rousing, for the first and last time, a faint hope in the breasts of the delightful people. 'It cannot stand without them, and I sometimes think—but I cannot expect your generation to agree, for even my daughter disagrees with me here.'

'Never mind us or her. Do say!'

'I sometimes think that it is wiser to leave action and discussion to men.'

There was a little silence.

'One admits that the arguments against the suffrage *are* extraordinarily strong,' said a girl opposite, leaning forward and crumbling her bread.

'Are they? I never follow any arguments. I am only too thankful not to have a vote myself.'

'We didn't mean the vote, though, did we?' supplied Margaret. 'Aren't we differing on something much wider, Mrs Wilcox? Whether women are to remain what they have been since the dawn of history; or whether, since men have moved forward so far, they too may move forward a little now. I say they may. I would even admit a biological change.'

'I don't know, I don't know.'

'I must be getting back to my overhanging warehouse,' said the man. 'They've turned disgracefully strict.'

Mrs Wilcox also rose.

'Oh, but come upstairs for a little. Miss Quested plays. Do you like MacDowell?[6] Do you mind him only having two noises? If you must really go, I'll see you out. Won't you even have coffee?'

They left the dining-room, closing the door behind them, and as Mrs Wilcox buttoned up her jacket she said: 'What an interesting life you all lead in London!'

‘No, we don’t,’ said Margaret, with a sudden revulsion. ‘We lead the lives of gibbering monkeys. Mrs Wilcox—really—we have something quiet and stable at the bottom. We really have. All my friends have. Don’t pretend you enjoyed lunch, for you loathed it, but forgive me by coming again, alone, or by asking me to you.’

‘I am used to young people,’ said Mrs Wilcox, and with each word she spoke the outlines of known things grew dim. ‘I hear a great deal of chatter at home, for we, like you, entertain a great deal. With us it is more sport and politics, but—I enjoyed my lunch very much, Miss Schlegel, dear, and am not pretending, and only wish I could have joined in more. For one thing, I’m not particularly well just today. For another, you younger people move so quickly that it dazes me. Charles is the same, Dolly the same. But we are all in the same boat, old and young. I never forget that.’

They were silent for a moment. Then, with a newborn emotion, they shook hands. The conversation ceased suddenly when Margaret re-entered the dining-room: her friends had been talking over her new friend, and had dismissed her as uninteresting.

X

Several days passed.

Was Mrs Wilcox one of the unsatisfactory people—there are many of them—who dangle intimacy and then withdraw it? They evoke our interests and affections, and keep the life of the spirit dawdling round them. Then they withdraw. When physical passion is involved, there is a definite name for such behaviour—flirting—and if carried far enough it is punishable by law. But no law—not public opinion even—punishes those who coquette with friendship, though the dull ache that they inflict, the sense of misdirected effort and exhaustion, may be as intolerable. Was she one of these?

Margaret feared so at first, for, with a Londoner’s impatience, she wanted everything to be settled up immediately. She mistrusted the periods of quiet that are essential to true growth. Desiring to book Mrs Wilcox as a friend, she pressed on the ceremony, pencil, as it were, in hand, pressing the more because the rest of the family were away, and the opportunity seemed favourable. But the elder woman would not be hurried. She refused to fit in with the Wickham Place set, or to reopen discussion of Helen and Paul, whom Margaret would have utilized as a short cut. She took her time, or perhaps let time take her, and when the crisis did come all was ready.

The crisis opened with a message: would Miss Schlegel come shopping? Christmas was nearing, and Mrs Wilcox felt behindhand with the presents. She had taken some more days in bed, and must make up for lost time. Margaret accepted, and at eleven o’clock one cheerless morning they started out in a brougham.[1]

‘First of all,’ began Margaret, ‘we must make a list and tick off the people’s names. My aunt always does, and this fog may thicken up any moment. Have you any ideas?’

‘I thought we would go to Harrod’s or the Haymarket Stores,’ said Mrs Wilcox rather hopelessly. ‘Everything is sure to be there. I am not a good shopper. The din is so confusing, and your aunt is quite right—one ought to make a list. Take my notebook, then, and write your own name at the top of the page.’

‘Oh, hooray!’ said Margaret, writing it. ‘How very kind of you to start with me!’ But she did not want to receive anything expensive. Their acquaintance was singular rather than intimate, and she divined that the Wilcox clan would resent any expenditure on outsiders; the more compact families do. She did not want to be thought a second Helen, who would snatch presents since she could not snatch young men, nor to be exposed, like a second Aunt Juley, to the insults of Charles. A certain austerity of demeanour was best, and she added: ‘I don’t really want a Yuletide gift, though. In fact, I’d rather not.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’ve odd ideas about Christmas. Because I have all that money can buy. I want more people, but no more things.’

‘I should like to give you something worth your acquaintance, Miss Schlegel, in memory of your kindness to me during my lonely fortnight. It has so happened that I have been left alone, and you have stopped me from brooding. I am too apt to brood.’

‘If that is so,’ said Margaret, ‘if I have happened to be of use to you, which I didn’t know, you cannot pay me back with anything tangible.’

‘I suppose not, but one would like to. Perhaps I shall think of something as we go about.’

Her name remained at the head of the list, but nothing was written opposite it. They drove from shop to shop. The air was white, and when they alighted it tasted like cold pennies. At times they passed through a clot of gray. Mrs Wilcox’s vitality was low that morning, and it was Margaret who decided on a horse for this little girl, a golliwog for that, for the rector’s wife a copper warming-tray. ‘We always give the servants money.’ ‘Yes, do you, yes, much easier,’ replied Margaret, but felt the grotesque impact of the unseen upon the seen, and saw issuing from a forgotten manger at Bethlehem this torrent of coins and toys. Vulgarity reigned. Public-houses, besides their usual exhortation against temperance reform, invited men to ‘Join our Christmas goose club’—one bottle of gin, etc., or two, according to subscription. A poster of a woman in tights heralded the Christmas pantomime, and

little red devils, who had come in again that year, were prevalent upon the Christmas-cards. Margaret was no morbid idealist. She did not wish this spate of business and self- advertisement checked. It was only the occasion of it that struck her with amazement annually. How many of these vacillating shoppers and tired shop-assistants realized that it was a divine event that drew them together? She realized it, though standing outside in the matter. She was not a Christian in the accepted sense; she did not believe that God had ever worked among us as a young artisan. These people, or most of them, believed it, and, if pressed, would affirm it in words. But the visible signs of their belief were Regent Street or Drury Lane, a little mud displaced, a little money spent, a little food cooked, eaten and forgotten. Inadequate. But in public who shall express the unseen adequately? It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision.

'No, I do like Christmas on the whole,' she announced. 'In its clumsy way, it does approach Peace and Goodwill. But oh, it is clumsier every year.'

'Is it? I am only used to country Christmases.'

'We are usually in London, and play the game with vigour—carols at the Abbey, clumsy midday meal, clumsy dinner for the maids, followed by Christmas-tree and dancing of poor children, with songs from Helen. The drawing-room does very well for that. We put the tree in the powder-closet, and draw a curtain when the candles are lighted, and with the looking-glass behind it looks quite pretty. I wish we might have a powder-closet in our next house. Of course, the tree has to be very small, and the presents don't hang on it. No; the presents reside in a sort of rocky landscape made of crumpled brown paper.'

'You spoke of your "next house", Miss Schlegel. Then are you leaving Wickham Place?'

'Yes, in two or three years, when the lease expires. We must.'

'Have you been there long?'

'All our lives.'

'You will be very sorry to leave it.'

'I suppose so. We scarcely realize it yet. My father—' She broke off, for they had reached the stationery department of the Haymarket Stores, and Mrs Wilcox wanted to order some private greeting-cards.

'If possible, something distinctive,' she sighed. At the counter she found a friend, bent on the same errand, and conversed with her insipidly, wasting much time. 'My husband and our daughter are motoring.' 'Bertha too? Oh, fancy, what a coincidence!' Margaret, though not practical, could shine in such company as this. While they talked, she went through a volume of specimen cards, and submitted one for Mrs Wilcox's inspection. Mrs Wilcox was delighted—so original, words so sweet; she would order a hundred like that, and could never be sufficiently grateful. Then, just as the assistant was booking the order, she said: 'Do you know, I'll wait. On second thoughts, I'll wait. There's plenty of time still, isn't there, and I shall be able to get Evie's opinion.'

They returned to the carriage by devious paths; when they were in, she said, 'But couldn't you get it renewed?'

'I beg your pardon?' asked Margaret.

'The lease, I mean.'

'Oh, the lease! Have you been thinking of that all the time? How very kind of you!'

'Surely something could be done.'

'No; values have risen too enormously. They mean to pull down Wickham Place, and build flats like yours.'

'But how horrible!'

'Landlords are horrible.'

Then she said vehemently: 'It is monstrous, Miss Schlegel; it isn't right. I had no idea that this was hanging over you. I do pity you from the bottom of my heart. To be parted from your house, your father's house—it oughtn't to be allowed. It is worse than dying. I would rather die than—oh, poor girls! Can what they call civilization be right, if people mayn't die in the room where they were born? My dear, I am so sorry—'

Margaret did not know what to say. Mrs Wilcox had been overtired by the shopping, and was inclined to hysteria.

'Howards End was nearly pulled down once. It would have killed me.'

'Howards End must be a very different house to ours. We are fond of ours, but there is nothing distinctive about it. As you saw, it is an ordinary London house. We shall easily find another.'

'So you think.'

'Again my lack of experience, I suppose!' said Margaret, easing away from the subject. 'I can't say anything when you take up that line, Mrs Wilcox. I wish I could see myself as you see me—foreshortened into a *Backfisch*.[2] Quite the ingénue. Very charming—wonderfully well read for my age, but incapable—'

Mrs Wilcox would not be deterred. 'Come down with me to Howards End now,' she said, more vehemently than ever. 'I want you to see it. You have never seen it. I want to hear what you say about it, for you do put things so wonderfully.'

Margaret glanced at the pitiless air and then at the tired face of her companion. 'Later on I should love it,' she continued, 'but it's hardly the weather for such an expedition, and we ought to start when we're fresh. Isn't the house shut up, too?'

She received no answer. Mrs Wilcox appeared to be annoyed.

'Might I come some other day?'

Mrs Wilcox leant forward and tapped the glass. 'Back to Wickham Place, please!' was her order to the coachman.

Margaret had been snubbed.

'A thousand thanks, Miss Schlegel, for all your help.'

'Not at all.'

'It is such a comfort to get the presents off my mind—the Christmas-cards especially. I do admire your choice.'

It was her turn to receive no answer. In her turn Margaret became annoyed.

'My husband and Evie will be back the day after tomorrow. That is why I dragged you out shopping today. I stayed in town chiefly to shop, but got through nothing, and now he writes that they must cut their tour short, the weather is so bad, and the police traps have been so bad—nearly as bad as in Surrey. Ours is such a careful chauffeur, and my husband feels it particularly hard that they should be treated like road-hogs.'

'Why?'

'Well, naturally he—he isn't a road-hog.'

'He was exceeding the speed limit, I conclude. He must expect to suffer with the lower animals.'

Mrs Wilcox was silenced. In growing discomfort they drove homewards. The city seemed satanic, the narrower streets oppressing like the galleries of a mine. No harm was done by the fog to trade, for it lay high, and the lighted windows of the shops were thronged with customers. It was rather a darkening of the spirit, which fell back upon itself, to find a more grievous darkness within. Margaret nearly spoke a dozen times, but something throttled her. She felt petty and awkward, and her meditations on Christmas grew more cynical. Peace? It may bring other gifts, but is there a single Londoner to whom Christmas is peaceful? The craving for excitement and for elaboration has ruined that blessing. Goodwill? Had she seen any example of it in the hordes of purchasers? Or in herself? She had failed to respond to this invitation merely because it was a little queer and imaginative—she, whose birthright it was to nourish imagination! Better to have accepted, to have tired themselves a little by the journey, than coldly to reply, 'Might I come some other day?' Her cynicism left her. There would be no other day. This shadowy woman would never ask her again.

They parted at the Mansions. Mrs Wilcox went in after due civilities, and Margaret watched the tall, lonely figure sweep up the hall to the lift. As the glass doors closed on it she had the sense of an imprisonment. The beautiful head disappeared first, still buried in the muff; the long trailing skirt followed. A woman of undefinable rarity was going up heavenward, like a specimen in a bottle. And into what a heaven—a vault as of hell, sooty black, from which soots descended!

At lunch her brother, seeing her inclined for silence, insisted on talking. Tibby was not ill-natured, but from babyhood something drove him to do the unwelcome and the unexpected. Now he gave her a long account of the day-school that he sometimes patronized. The account was interesting, and she had often pressed him for it before, but she could not attend now, for her mind was focused on the invisible. She discerned that Mrs Wilcox, though a loving wife and mother, had only one passion in life—her house—and that the moment was solemn when she invited a friend to share this passion with her. To answer 'another day' was to answer as a fool. 'Another day' will do for bricks and mortar, but not for the Holy of Holies into which Howards End had been transfigured. Her own curiosity was slight. She had heard more than enough about it in the summer. The nine windows, the vine and the wych-elm had no pleasant connections for her, and she would have preferred to spend the afternoon at a concert. But imagination triumphed. While her brother held forth she determined to go, at whatever cost, and to compel Mrs Wilcox to go too. When lunch was over she stepped over to the flats.

Mrs Wilcox had just gone away for the night.

Margaret said that it was of no consequence, hurried downstairs, and took a hansom to King's Cross. She was convinced that the escapade was important, though it would have puzzled her to say why. There was question of imprisonment and escape, and, though she did not know the time of the train, she strained her eyes for St Pancras's clock.

Then the clock of King's Cross swung into sight, a second moon in that infernal sky, and her cab drew up at the station. There was a train for Hilton in five minutes. She took a ticket, asking in her agitation for a single. As she did so, a grave and happy voice saluted her and thanked her.

'I will come if I still may,' said Margaret, laughing nervously.

'You are coming to sleep, dear, too. It is in the morning that my house is most beautiful. You are coming to stop. I cannot show you my meadow properly except at sunrise. These fogs'—she pointed at the station roof—'never spread far. I dare say they are sitting in the sun in Hertfordshire, and you will never repent joining them.'

'I shall never repent joining you.'

'It is the same.'

They began the walk up the long platform. Far at its end stood the train, breasting the darkness without. They never reached it. Before imagination could triumph, there were cries of 'Mother! Mother!' and a heavy-browed girl darted out of the cloakroom and seized Mrs Wilcox by the arm.

'Evie!' she gasped. 'Evie, my pet—'

The girl called: 'Father! I say! Look who's here.'

'Evie, dearest girl, why aren't you in Yorkshire?'

'No—motor smash—changed plans—father's coming.'

'Why, Ruth!' cried Mr Wilcox, joining them. 'What in the name of all that's wonderful are you doing here, Ruth?'

Mrs Wilcox had recovered herself.

'Oh, Henry dear!—here's a lovely surprise—but let me introduce—but I think you know Miss Schlegel.'

‘Oh yes,’ he replied, not greatly interested. ‘But how’s yourself, Ruth?’

‘Fit as a fiddle,’ she answered gaily.

‘So are we, and so was our car, which ran A1 as far as Ripon, but there a wretched horse and cart which a fool of a driver—’

‘Miss Schlegel, our little outing must be for another day.’

‘I was saying that this fool of a driver, as the policeman himself admits—’

‘Another day, Mrs Wilcox. Of course.’

‘—But as we’re insured against third-party risks, it won’t so much matter—’

‘—Cart and car being practically at right angles—’

The voices of the happy family rose high. Margaret was left alone. No one wanted her. Mrs Wilcox walked out of King’s Cross between her husband and her daughter, listening to both of them.

XI

THE FUNERAL WAS OVER. The carriages had rolled away through the soft mud, and only the poor remained. They approached to the newly dug shaft and looked their last at the coffin, now almost hidden beneath the spadefuls of clay. It was their moment. Most of them were women from the dead woman’s district, to whom black garments had been served out by Mr Wilcox’s orders. Pure curiosity had brought others. They thrilled with the excitement of a death, and of a rapid death, and stood in groups or moved between the graves, like drops of ink. The son of one of them, a woodcutter, was perched high above their heads, pollarding one of the churchyard elms. From where he sat he could see the village of Hilton, strung upon the North Road, with its accreting suburbs; the sunset beyond, scarlet and orange, winking at him beneath brows of gray; the church; the plantations; and behind him an unspoilt country of fields and farms. But he, too, was rolling the event luxuriously in his mouth. He tried to tell his mother down below all that he had felt when he saw the coffin approaching: how he could not leave his work and yet did not like to go on with it; how he had almost slipped out of the tree, he was so upset; the rooks had cawed, and no wonder—it was as if rooks knew too. His mother claimed the prophetic power herself—she had seen a strange look about Mrs Wilcox for some time. London had done the mischief, said others. She had been a kind lady; her grandmother had been kind, too—a plainer person, but very kind. Ah, the old sort was dying out! Mr Wilcox, he was a kind gentleman. They advanced to the topic again and again, dully, but with exaltation. The funeral of a rich person was to them what the funeral of Alcestis or Ophelia[1] is to the educated. It was Art; though remote from life, it enhanced life’s values, and they witnessed it avidly.

The gravediggers, who had kept up an undercurrent of disapproval—they disliked Charles; it was not a moment to speak of such things, but they did not like Charles Wilcox—the gravediggers finished their work and piled up the wreaths and crosses above it. The sun set over Hilton: the gray brows of the evening flushed a little, and were cleft with one scarlet frown. Chattering sadly to each other, the mourners passed through the lych-gate and traversed the chestnut avenues that led down to the village. The young woodcutter stayed a little longer, poised above the silence and swaying rhythmically. At last the bough fell beneath his saw. With a grunt, he descended, his thoughts dwelling no longer on death, but on love, for he was mating. He stopped as he passed the new grave; a sheaf of tawny chrysanthemums had caught his eye. ‘They didn’t ought to have coloured flowers at buryings,’ he reflected. Trudging on a few steps, he stopped again, looked furtively at the dusk, turned back, wrenched a chrysanthemum from the sheaf, and hid it in his pocket.

After him came silence absolute. The cottage that abutted on the churchyard was empty, and no other house near. Hour after hour the scene of the interment remained without an eye to witness it. Clouds drifted over it from the west; or the church may have been a ship, high-prowed, steering with all its company towards infinity. Towards morning the air grew colder, the sky clearer, the surface of the earth hard and sparkling above the prostrate dead. The woodcutter, returning after a night of joy, reflected: ‘They lilies, they chrysants; it’s a pity I didn’t take them all.’

Up at Howards End they were attempting breakfast. Charles and Evie sat in the dining-room, with Mrs Charles. Their father, who could not bear to see a face, breakfasted upstairs. He suffered acutely. Pain came over him in spasms, as if it was physical, and, even while he was about to eat, his eyes would fill with tears, and he would lay down the morsel untasted.

He remembered his wife’s even goodness during thirty years. Not anything in detail—not courtship or early raptures—but just the unvarying virtue, that seemed to him a woman’s noblest quality. So many women are capricious, breaking into odd flaws of passion or frivolity. Not so his wife. Year after year, summer and winter, as bride and mother, she had been the same, he had always trusted her. Her tenderness! Her innocence! The wonderful innocence that was hers by the gift of God. Ruth knew no more of worldly wickedness and wisdom than did the flowers in her garden, or the grass in her field. Her idea of business—’Henry, why do people who have enough money try to get more money?’ Her idea of politics—’I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet there would be no more wars.’ Her idea of religion—ah, this had been a cloud, but a cloud that passed. She

came of Quaker stock, and he and his family, formerly Dissenters,[2] were now members of the Church of England. The rector's sermons had at first repelled her, and she had expressed a desire for 'a more inward light', adding, 'not so much for myself as for baby' (Charles). Inward light must have been granted, for he heard no complaints in later years. They brought up their three children without dispute. They had never disputed.

She lay under the earth now. She had gone, and, as if to make her going the more bitter, had gone with a touch of mystery that was all unlike her. 'Why didn't you tell me you knew of it?' he had moaned, and her faint voice had answered: 'I didn't want to, Henry—I might have been wrong—and everyone hates illnesses.' He had been told of the horror by a strange doctor, whom she had consulted during his absence from town. Was this altogether just? Without fully explaining, she had died. It was a fault on her part, and—tears rushed into his eyes—what a little fault! It was the only time she had deceived him in those thirty years.

He rose to his feet and looked out of the window, for Evie had come in with the letters, and he could meet no one's eye. Ah yes—she had been a good woman—she had been steady. He chose the word deliberately. To him steadiness included all praise.

He himself, gazing at the wintry garden, is in appearance a steady man. His face was not as square as his son's, and indeed the chin, though firm enough in outline, retreated a little, and the lips, ambiguous, were curtained by a moustache. But there was no external hint of weakness. The eyes, if capable of kindness and good-fellowship, if ruddy for the moment with tears, were the eyes of one who could not be driven. The forehead, too, was like Charles's. High and straight, brown and polished, merging abruptly into temples and skull, it had the effect of a bastion that protected his head from the world. At times it had the effect of a blank wall. He had dwelt behind it, intact and happy, for fifty years.

'The post's come, father,' said Evie awkwardly.

'Thanks. Put it down.'

'Has the breakfast been all right?'

'Yes, thanks.'

The girl glanced at him and at it with constraint. She did not know what to do.

'Charles says do you want *The Times*?'

'No, I'll read it later.'

'Ring if you want anything, father, won't you?'

'I've all I want.'

Having sorted the letters from the circulars, she went back to the dining-room.

'Father's eaten nothing,' she announced, sitting down with wrinkled brows behind the tea-urn.

Charles did not answer, but after a moment he ran quickly upstairs, opened the door, and said: 'Look here, father, you must eat, you know'; and, having paused for a reply that did not come, stole down again. 'He's going to read his letters first, I think,' he said evasively; 'I dare say he will go on with his breakfast afterwards.' Then he took up *The Times*, and for some time there was no sound except the clink of cup against saucer and of knife on plate.

Poor Mrs Charles sat between her silent companions, terrified at the course of events, and a little bored. She was a rubbishy little creature, and she knew it. A telegram had dragged her from Naples to the deathbed of a woman whom she had scarcely known. A word from her husband had plunged her into mourning. She desired to mourn inwardly as well, but she wished that Mrs Wilcox, since fated to die, could have died before the marriage, for then less would have been expected of her. Crumbling her toast, and too nervous to ask for the butter, she remained almost motionless, thankful only for this, that her father-in-law was having his breakfast upstairs.

At last Charles spoke. 'They had no business to be pollarding those elms yesterday,' he said to his sister.

'No indeed.'

'I must make a note of that,' he continued. 'I am surprised that the rector allowed it.'

'Perhaps it may not be the rector's affair.'

'Whose else could it be?'

'The lord of the manor.'

'Impossible.'

'Butter, Dolly?'

'Thank you, Evie dear. Charles—'

'Yes, dear?'

'I didn't know one could pollard elms. I thought one only pollarded willows.'

'Oh no, one can pollard elms.'

'Then why oughtn't the elms in the churchyard to be pollarded?' Charles frowned a little, and turned again to his sister.

'Another point. I must speak to Chalkeley.'

'Yes, rather; you must complain to Chalkeley.'

'It's no good him saying he is not responsible for those men. He is responsible.'

'Yes, rather.'

Brother and sister were not callous. They spoke thus, partly because they desired to keep Chalkeley up to the mark—a healthy desire in its way—partly because they avoided the personal note in life. All Wilcoxes did. It did not seem to them of supreme importance. Or it may be as Helen supposed: they realized its importance, but were

afraid of it. Panic and emptiness, could one glance behind. They were not callous, and they left the breakfast-table with aching hearts. Their mother never had come in to breakfast. It was in the other rooms, and especially in the garden, that they felt her loss most. As Charles went out to the garage, he was reminded at every step of the woman who had loved him and whom he could never replace. What battles he had fought against her gentle conservatism! How she had disliked improvements, yet how loyally she had accepted them when made! He and his father—what trouble they had had to get this very garage! With what difficulty had they persuaded her to yield them the paddock for it—the paddock that she loved more dearly than the garden itself! The vine—she had got her way about the vine. It still encumbered the south wall with its unproductive branches. And so with Evie, as she stood talking to the cook. Though she could take up her mother's work inside the house, just as the men could take it up without, she felt that something unique had fallen out of her life. Their grief, though less poignant than their father's, grew from deeper roots, for a wife may be replaced: a mother never.

Charles would go back to the office. There was little to do at Howards End. The contents of his mother's will had been long known to them. There were no legacies, no annuities, none of the posthumous bustle with which some of the dead prolong their activities. Trusting her husband, she had left him everything without reserve. She was quite a poor woman—the house had been all her dowry, and the house would come to Charles in time. Her water-colours Mr Wilcox intended to reserve for Paul, while Evie would take the jewellery and lace. How easily she slipped out of life! Charles thought the habit laudable, though he did not intend to adopt it himself, whereas Margaret would have seen in it an almost culpable indifference to earthly fame. Cynicism—not the superficial cynicism that snarls and sneers, but the cynicism that can go with courtesy and tenderness—that was the note of Mrs Wilcox's will. She wanted not to vex people. That accomplished, the earth might freeze over her for ever.

No, there was nothing for Charles to wait for. He could not go on with his honeymoon, so he would go up to London and work—he felt too miserable hanging about. He and Dolly would have the furnished flat while his father rested quietly in the country with Evie. He could also keep an eye on his own little house, which was being painted and decorated for him in one of the Surrey suburbs, and in which he hoped to install himself soon after Christmas. Yes, he would go up after lunch in his new motor, and the town servants, who had come down for the funeral, would go up by train.

He found his father's chauffeur in the garage, said 'Morning' without looking at the man's face, and, bending over the car, continued: 'Hullo! my new car's been driven!'

'Has it, sir?'

'Yes,' said Charles, getting rather red; 'and whoever's driven it hasn't cleaned it properly, for there's mud on the axle. Take it off.'

The man went for the cloths without a word. He was a chauffeur as ugly as sin—not that this did him disservice with Charles, who thought charm in a man rather rot, and had soon got rid of the little Italian beast with whom they had started.

'Charles—' His bride was tripping after him over the hoar-frost, a dainty black column, her little face and elaborate mourning-hat forming the capital thereof.

'One minute, I'm busy. Well, Crane, who's been driving it, do you suppose?'

'Don't know, I'm sure, sir. No one's driven it since I've been back, but, of course, there's the fortnight I've been away with the other car in Yorkshire.'

The mud came off easily.

'Charles, your father's down. Something's happened. He wants you in the house at once. Oh, Charles!'

'Wait, dear, wait a minute. Who had the key of the garage while you were away, Crane?'

'The gardener, sir.'

'Do you mean to tell me that old Penny can drive a motor.'

'No, sir; no one's had the motor out, sir.'

'Then how do you account for the mud on the axle?'

'I can't, of course, say for the time I've been in Yorkshire. No more mud now, sir.'

Charles was vexed. The man was treating him as a fool, and if his heart had not been so heavy he would have reported him to his father. But it was not a morning for complaints. Ordering the motor to be round after lunch, he joined his wife, who had all the while been pouring out some incoherent story about a letter and a Miss Schlegel.

'Now, Dolly, I can attend to you. Miss Schlegel? What does she want?'

When people wrote a letter Charles always asked what they wanted. Want was to him the only cause of action. And the question in this case was correct, for his wife replied: 'She wants Howards End.'

'Howards End? Now, Crane, just don't forget to put on the Stepney wheel.'[3]

'No, sir.'

'Now, mind you don't forget, for I—come, little woman.' When they were out of the chauffeur's sight he put his arm round her waist and pressed her against him. All his affection and half his attention—it was what he granted her throughout their happy married life.

'But you haven't listened, Charles—'

'What's wrong?'

'I keep on telling you—Howards End. Miss Schlegel's got it.'

'Got what?' said Charles, unclasping her. 'What the dickens are you talking about?'

'Now, Charles, you promised not to say those naughty—'

‘Look here, I’m in no mood for foolery. It’s no morning for it either.’

‘I tell you—I keep on telling you—Miss Schlegel—she’s got it—your mother’s left it to her—and you’ve all got to move out!’

‘*Howards End*?’

‘*Howards End*!’ she screamed, mimicking him, and as she did so Evie came dashing out of the shrubbery.

‘Dolly, go back at once! My father’s much annoyed with you. Charles’—she hit herself wildly—’come in at once to father. He’s had a letter that’s too awful.’

Charles began to run, but checked himself, and stepped heavily across the gravel path. There the house was—the nine windows, the unprolific vine. He exclaimed ‘Schlegels again!’ and, as if to complete chaos, Dolly said: ‘Oh no, the matron of the nursing-home has written instead of her.’

‘Come in, all three of you!’ cried his father, no longer inert. ‘Dolly, why have you disobeyed me?’

‘Oh, Mr Wilcox—’

‘I told you not to go out to the garage. I’ve heard you all shouting in the garden. I won’t have it. Come in.’

He stood in the porch, transformed, letters in his hand.

‘Into the dining-room, every one of you. We can’t discuss private matters in the middle of all the servants. Here, Charles, here; read these. See what you make.’

Charles took two letters, and read them as he followed the procession. The first was a covering note from the matron. Mrs Wilcox had desired her, when the funeral should be over, to forward the enclosed. The enclosed—it was from his mother herself. She had written: ‘To my husband: I should like Miss Schlegel (Margaret) to have Howards End.’

‘I suppose we’re going to have a talk about this?’ he remarked, ominously calm.

‘Certainly. I was coming out to you when Dolly—’

‘Well, let’s sit down.’

‘Come, Evie, don’t waste time, sit down.’

In silence they drew up to the breakfast-table. The events of yesterday—indeed, of this morning—suddenly receded into a past so remote that they seemed scarcely to have lived in it. Heavy breathings were heard. They were calming themselves. Charles, to steady them further, read the enclosure out loud: ‘A note in my mother’s handwriting, in an envelope addressed to my father, sealed. Inside: “I should like Miss Schlegel (Margaret) to have Howards End.” No date, no signature. Forwarded through the matron of that nursing-home. Now, the question is —’

Dolly interrupted him. ‘But I say that note isn’t legal. Houses ought to be done by a lawyer, Charles, surely.’

Her husband worked his jaw severely. Little lumps appeared in front of either ear—a symptom that she had not yet learned to respect, and she asked whether she might see the note. Charles looked at his father for permission, who said abstractedly: ‘Give it her.’ She seized it, and at once exclaimed: ‘Why, it’s only in pencil! I said so. Pencil never counts.’

‘We know that it is not legally binding, Dolly,’ said Mr Wilcox, speaking from out of his fortress. ‘We are aware of that. Legally, I should be justified in tearing it up and throwing it into the fire. Of course, my dear, we consider you as one of the family, but it will be better if you do not interfere with what you do not understand.’

Charles, vexed both with his father and his wife, then repeated: ‘The question is—’ He had cleared a space of the breakfast-table from plates and knives, so that he could draw patterns on the tablecloths. ‘The question is whether Miss Schlegel, during the fortnight we were all away, whether she unduly—’ He stopped.

‘I don’t think that,’ said his father, whose nature was nobler than his son’s.

‘Don’t think what?’

‘That she would have—that it is a case of undue influence. No, to my mind the question is the—the invalid’s condition at the time she wrote.’

‘My dear father, consult an expert if you like, but I don’t admit it is my mother’s writing.’

‘Why, you just said it was!’ cried Dolly.

‘Never mind if I did,’ he blazed out; ‘and hold your tongue.’

The poor little wife coloured at this, and, drawing her handkerchief from her pocket, shed a few tears. No one noticed her. Evie was scowling like an angry boy. The two men were gradually assuming the manner of the committee-room. They were both at their best when serving on committees. They did not make the mistake of handling human affairs in the bulk, but disposed of them item by item, sharply. Calligraphy was the item before them now, and on it they turned their well-trained brains. Charles, after a little demur, accepted the writing as genuine, and they passed on to the next point. It is the best—perhaps the only—way of dodging emotion. They were the average human article, and had they considered the note as a whole it would have driven them miserable or mad. Considered item by item, the emotional content was minimized, and all went forward smoothly. The clock ticked, the coals blazed higher, and contended with the white radiance that poured in through the windows. Unnoticed, the sun occupied his sky, and the shadows of the tree stems, extraordinarily solid, fell like trenches of purple across the frosted lawn. It was a glorious winter morning. Evie’s fox-terrier, who had passed for white, was only a dirty gray dog now, so intense was the purity that surrounded him. He was discredited, but the blackbirds that he was chasing glowed with Arabian darkness, for all the conventional colouring of life had been altered. Inside, the clock struck ten with a rich and confident note. Other clocks confirmed it, and the discussion moved towards its close.

To follow it is unnecessary. It is rather a moment when the commentator should step forward. Ought the Wilcoxes to have offered their home to Margaret? I think not. The appeal was too flimsy. It was not legal; it had been written in illness, and under the spell of a sudden friendship; it was contrary to the dead woman's intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that nature was understood by them. To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir. And—pushing one step further in these mists—may they not have decided even better than they supposed? Is it credible that the possessions of the spirit can be bequeathed at all? Has the soul offspring? A wych-elm tree, a vine, a wisp of hay with dew on it—can passion for such things be transmitted where there is no bond of blood? No; the Wilcoxes are not to be blamed. The problem is too terrific, and they could not even perceive a problem. No; it is natural and fitting that after due debate they should tear the note up and throw it onto their dining-room fire. The practical moralist may acquit them absolutely. He who strives to look deeper may acquit them—almost. For one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal. The woman who had died did say to them, 'Do this,' and they answered, 'We will not.'

The incident made a most painful impression on them. Grief mounted into the brain and worked there disquietingly. Yesterday they had lamented: 'She was a dear mother, a true wife; in our absence she neglected her health and died.' Today they thought: 'She was not as true, as dear, as we supposed.' The desire for a more inward light had found expression at last, the unseen had impacted on the seen, and all that they could say was 'Treachery'. Mrs Wilcox had been treacherous to the family, to the laws of property, to her own written word. How did she expect Howards End to be conveyed to Miss Schlegel? Was her husband, to whom it legally belonged, to make it over to her as a free gift? Was the said Miss Schlegel to have a life interest in it, or to own it absolutely? Was there to be no compensation for the garage and other improvements that they had made under the assumption that all would be theirs some day? Treacherous! Treacherous and absurd! When we think the dead both treacherous and absurd, we have gone far towards reconciling ourselves to their departure. That note, scribbled in pencil, sent through the matron, was unbusinesslike as well as cruel, and decreased at once the value of the woman who had written it.

'Ah, well' said Mr Wilcox, rising from the table. 'I shouldn't have thought it possible.'

'Mother couldn't have meant it,' said Evie, still frowning.

'No, my girl, of course not.'

'Mother believed so in ancestors too—it isn't like her to leave anything to an outsider, who'd never appreciate.'

'The whole thing is unlike her,' he announced. 'If Miss Schlegel had been poor, if she had wanted a house, I could understand it a little. But she has a house of her own. Why should she want another? She wouldn't have any use for Howards End.'

'That time may prove,' murmured Charles.

'How?' asked his sister.

'Presumably she knows—mother will have told her. She got twice or three times into the nursing-home. Presumably she is awaiting developments.'

'What a horrid woman!' And Dolly, who had recovered, cried, 'Why, she may be coming down to turn us out now!'

Charles put her right. 'I wish she would,' he said ominously. 'I could then deal with her.'

'So could I,' echoed his father, who was feeling rather in the cold. Charles had been kind in understanding the funeral arrangements and in telling him to eat his breakfast, but the boy as he grew up was a little dictatorial, and assumed the post of chairman too readily. 'I could deal with her, if she comes, but she won't come. You're all a bit hard on Miss Schlegel.'

'That Paul business was pretty scandalous, though.'

'I want no more of the Paul business, Charles, as I said at the time, and besides, it is quite apart from this business. Margaret Schlegel has been officious and tiresome during this terrible week, and we have all suffered under her, but upon my soul she's honest. She's *not* in collusion with the matron. I'm absolutely certain of it. Nor was she with the doctor, I'm equally certain of that. She did not hide anything from us, for up to that very afternoon she was as ignorant as we are. She, like ourselves, was a dupe—' He stopped for a moment. 'You see, Charles, in her terrible pain your poor mother put us all in false positions. Paul would not have left England, you would not have gone to Italy, nor Evie and I into Yorkshire, if only we had known. Well, Miss Schlegel's position has been equally false. Take all in all, she has not come out of it badly.'

Evie said: 'But those chrysanthemums—'

'Or coming down to the funeral at all—' echoed Dolly.

'Why shouldn't she come down? She had the right to, and she stood far back among the Hilton women. The flowers—certainly we should not have sent such flowers, but they may have seemed the right thing to her, Evie, and for all you know they may be the custom in Germany.'

'Oh, I forgot she isn't really English,' cried Evie. 'That would explain a lot.'

'She's a cosmopolitan,' said Charles, looking at his watch. 'I admit I'm rather down on cosmopolitans. My fault, doubtless. I cannot stand them, and a German cosmopolitan is the limit. I think that's about all, isn't it? I want to run down and see Chalkeley. A bicycle will do. And, by the way, I wish you'd speak to Crane some time. I'm certain he's had my new car out.'

'Has he done it any harm?'

'No.'

'In that case I shall let it pass. It's not worth while having a row.'

Charles and his father sometimes disagreed. But they always parted with an increased regard for one another, and each desired no doughtier comrade when it was necessary to voyage for a little past the emotions. So the sailors of Ulysses voyaged past the Sirens, having first stopped one another's ears with wool.

XII

CHARLES NEED NOT HAVE been anxious. Miss Schlegel had never heard of his mother's strange request. She was to hear of it in after years, when she had built up her life differently, and it was to fit into position as the headstone of the corner. Her mind was bent on other questions now, and by her also it would have been rejected as the fantasy of an invalid.

She was parting from these Wilcoxes for the second time. Paul and his mother, ripple and great wave, had flowed into her life and ebbed out of it for ever. The ripple had left no traces behind; the wave had strewn at her feet fragments torn from the unknown. A curious seeker, she stood for a while at the verge of the sea that tells so little, but tells a little, and watched the outgoing of this last tremendous tide. Her friend had vanished in agony, but not, she believed, in degradation. Her withdrawal had hinted at other things besides disease and pain. Some leave our life with tears, others with an insane frigidity; Mrs Wilcox had taken the middle course, which only rarer natures can pursue. She had kept proportion. She had told a little of her grim secret to her friends, but not too much; she had shut up her heart—almost, but not entirely. It is thus, if there is any rule, that we ought to die—neither as victim nor as fanatic, but as the seafarer who can greet with an equal eye the deep that he is entering, and the shore that he must leave.

The last word—whatever it would be—had certainly not been said in Hilton churchyard. She had not died there. A funeral is not death, any more than baptism is birth or marriage union. All three are the clumsy devices, coming now too late, now too early, by which society would register the quick motions of man. In Margaret's eyes Mrs Wilcox had escaped registration. She had gone out of life vividly, her own way, and no dust was so truly dust as the contents of that heavy coffin, lowered with ceremonial until it rested on the dust of the earth, no flowers so utterly wasted as the chrysanthemums that the frost must have withered before morning. Margaret had once said she 'loved superstition'. It was not true. Few women had tried more earnestly to pierce the accretions in which body and soul are enwrapped. The death of Mrs Wilcox had helped her in her work. She saw a little more clearly than hitherto what a human being is, and to what he may aspire. Truer relationships gleamed. Perhaps the last word would be hope—hope even on this side of the grave.

Meanwhile, she could take an interest in the survivors. In spite of her Christmas duties, in spite of her brother, the Wilcoxes continued to play a considerable part in her thoughts. She had seen so much of them in the final week. They were not 'her sort', they were often suspicious and stupid, and deficient where she excelled; but collision with them stimulated her, and she felt an interest that verged into liking, even for Charles. She desired to protect them, and often felt that they would protect her, excelling where she was deficient. Once past the rocks of emotion, they knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously. They led a life that she could not attain to—the outer life of 'telegrams and anger', which had detonated when Helen and Paul had touched in June, and had detonated again the other week. To Margaret this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby affected to do. It fostered such virtues as neatness, decision and obedience, virtues of the second rank, no doubt, but they have formed our civilization. They form character, too; Margaret could not doubt it: they keep the soul from becoming sloppy. How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world?

'Don't brood too much,' she wrote to Helen, 'on the superiority of the unseen to the seen. It's true, but to brood on it is medieval. Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them.'

Helen replied that she had no intention of brooding on such a dull subject. What did her sister take her for? The weather was magnificent. She and the Mosebachs had gone tobogganing on the only hill that Pomerania boasted. It was fun, but overcrowded, for the rest of Pomerania had gone there too. Helen loved the country, and her letter glowed with physical exercise and poetry. She spoke of the scenery, quiet, yet august; of the snow-clad fields, with their scampering herds of deer; of the river and its quaint entrance into the Baltic Sea; of the Oderberge, only three hundred feet high, from which one slid all too quickly back into the Pomeranian plains, and yet these Oderberge were real mountains, with pine-forests, streams, and views complete. 'It isn't size that counts so much as the way things are arranged.' In another paragraph she referred to Mrs Wilcox sympathetically, but the news had not bitten into her. She had not realized the accessories of death, which are in a sense more memorable than death itself. The atmosphere of precautions and recriminations, and in the midst a human body growing more vivid because it was in pain; the end of that body in Hilton churchyard; the survival of something that suggested hope, vivid in its turn against life's workaday cheerfulness—all these were lost to Helen, who only felt that a pleasant lady could now be pleasant no longer. She returned to Wickham Place full of her own affairs—she had had another proposal—and

Margaret, after a moment's hesitation, was content that this should be so.

The proposal had not been a serious matter. It was the work of Fräulein Mosebach, who had conceived the large and patriotic notion of winning back her cousins to the Fatherland by matrimony. England had played Paul Wilcox, and lost; Germany played Herr Förstmeister[1] someone—Helen could not remember his name. Herr Förstmeister lived in a wood, and standing on the summit of the Oderberge he had pointed out his house to Helen, or, rather, had pointed out the wedge of pines in which it lay. She had exclaimed, 'Oh, how lovely! That's the place for me!' and in the evening Frieda appeared in her bedroom. 'I have a message, dear Helen,' etc., and so she had, but had been very nice when Helen laughed; quite understood—a forest too solitary and damp—quite agreed, but Herr Förstmeister believed he had assurance to the contrary. Germany had lost, but with good humour; holding the manhood of the world, she felt bound to win. 'And there will even be someone for Tibby,' concluded Helen. 'There now, Tibby, think of that; Frieda is saving up a little girl for you, in pigtails and white worsted stockings, but the feet of the stockings are pink, as if the little girl had trodden in strawberries. I've talked too much. My head aches. Now you talk.'

Tibby consented to talk. He too was full of his own affairs, for he had just been up to try for a scholarship at Oxford. The men were down, and the candidates had been housed in various colleges, and had dined in hall. Tibby was sensitive to beauty, the experience was new, and he gave a description of his visit that was almost glowing. The august and mellow university, soaked with the richness of the western counties that it has served for a thousand years, appealed at once to the boy's taste; it was the kind of thing he could understand, and he understood it all the better because it was empty. Oxford is—Oxford; not a mere receptacle for youth, like Cambridge. Perhaps it wants its inmates to love it rather than to love one another; such at all events was to be its effect on Tibby. His sisters sent him there that he might make friends, for they knew that his education had been cranky, and had severed him from other boys and men. He made no friends. His Oxford remained Oxford empty, and he took into life with him, not the memory of a radiance, but the memory of a colour scheme.

It pleased Margaret to hear her brother and sister talking. They did not get on over-well as a rule. For a few moments she listened to them, feeling elderly and benign. Then something occurred to her, and she interrupted:

'Helen, I told you about poor Mrs Wilcox; that sad business?'

'Yes.'

'I have had a correspondence with her son. He was winding up the estate, and wrote to ask me whether his mother had wanted me to have anything. I thought it good of him, considering I knew her for so little. I said that she had once spoken of giving me a Christmas present, but we both forgot about it afterwards.'

'I hope Charles took the hint.'

'Yes—that is to say, her husband wrote later on, and thanked me for being a little kind to her, and actually gave me her silver vinaigrette.[2] Don't you think that is extra-ordinarily generous? It has made me like him very much. He hopes that this will not be the end of our acquaintance, but that you and I will go and stop with Evie some time in the future. I like Mr Wilcox. He is taking up his work—rubber—it is a big business. I gather he is launching out rather. Charles is in it, too. Charles is married—a pretty little creature, but she doesn't seem wise. They took on the flat, but now they have gone off to a house of their own.'

Helen, after a decent pause, continued her account of Stettin. How quickly a situation changes! In June she had been in a crisis; even in November she could blush and be unnatural; now it was January, and the whole affair lay forgotten. Looking back on the past six months, Margaret realized the chaotic nature of our daily life, and its difference from the orderly sequence that has been fabricated by historians. Actual life is full of false clues and signposts that lead nowhere. With infinite effort we nerve ourselves for a crisis that never comes. The most successful career must show a waste of strength that might have removed mountains, and the most unsuccessful is not that of the man who is taken unprepared, but of him who has prepared and is never taken. On a tragedy of that kind our national morality is duly silent. It assumes that preparation against danger is in itself a good, and that men, like nations, are the better for staggering through life fully armed. The tragedy of preparedness has scarcely been handled, save by the Greeks. Life is indeed dangerous, but not in the way morality would have us believe. It is indeed unmanageable, but the essence of it is not a battle. It is unmanageable because it is a romance, and its essence is romantic beauty.

Margaret hoped that for the future she would be less cautious, not more cautious, than she had been in the past.

XIII

OVER TWO YEARS PASSED, and the Schlegel household continued to lead its life of cultured but not ignoble ease, still swimming gracefully on the gray tides of London. Concerts and plays swept past them, money had been spent and renewed, reputations won and lost, and the city herself, emblematic of their lives, rose and fell in a continual flux, while her shallows washed more widely against the hills of Surrey and over the fields of Hertfordshire. This famous building had arisen, that was doomed. Today Whitehall had been transformed; it would be the turn of Regent Street tomorrow. And month by month the roads smelt more strongly of petrol, and were more difficult to cross, and human beings heard each other speak with greater difficulty, breathed less of the air, and saw less of the sky. Nature withdrew: the leaves were falling by midsummer; the sun shone through dirt with an admired obscurity.

To speak against London is no longer fashionable. The earth as an artistic cult has had its day, and the literature of the near future will probably ignore the country and seek inspiration from the town. One can understand the reaction. Of Pan and the elemental forces the public has heard a little too much—they seem Victorian, while London is Georgian—and those who care for the earth with sincerity may wait long ere the pendulum swings back to her again. Certainly London fascinates. One visualizes it as a tract of quivering gray; intelligent without purpose, and excitable without love; as a spirit that has altered before it can be chronicled; as a heart that certainly beats, but with no pulsation of humanity. It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men. A friend explains himself, the earth is explicable—from her we came, and we must return to her. But who can explain Westminster Bridge Road or Liverpool Street in the morning—the city inhaling—or the same thoroughfares in the evening—the city exhaling her exhausted air? We reach in desperation beyond the fog, beyond the very stars, the voids of the universe are ransacked to justify the monster, and stamped with a human face. London is religion's opportunity—not the decorous religion of theologians, but anthropomorphic, crude. Yes, the continuous flow would be tolerable if a man of our own sort—not anyone pompous or tearful—were caring for us up in the sky.

The Londoner seldom understands his city until it sweeps him, too, away from his moorings, and Margaret's eyes were not opened until the lease of Wickham Place expired. She had always known that it must expire, but the knowledge only became vivid about nine months before the event. Then the house was suddenly ringed with pathos. It had seen so much happiness. Why had it to be swept away? In the streets of the city she noted for the first time the architecture of hurry, and heard the language of hurry on the mouths of its inhabitants—clipped words, formless sentences, potted expressions of approval or disgust. Month by month things were stepping livelier, but to what goal? The population still rose, but what was the quality of the men born? The particular millionaire who owned the freehold of Wickham Place, and desired to erect Babylonian flats upon it—what right had he to stir so large a portion of the quivering jelly? He was not a fool—she had heard him expose socialism—but true insight began just where his intelligence ended, and one gathered that this was the case with most millionaires. What right had such men—but Margaret checked herself. That way lies madness.[1] Thank goodness she, too, had some money, and could purchase a new home.

Tibby, now in his second year at Oxford, was down for the Easter vacation, and Margaret took the opportunity of having a serious talk with him. Did he at all know where he wanted to live? Tibby didn't know that he did know. Did he at all know what he wanted to do? He was equally uncertain, but when pressed remarked that he should prefer to be quite free of any profession. Margaret was not shocked, but went on sewing for a few minutes before she replied:

'I was thinking of Mr Vyse. He never strikes me as particularly happy.'

'Ye-es,' said Tibby, and then held his mouth open in a curious quiver, as if he, too, had thought of Mr Vyse, had seen round, through, over and beyond Mr Vyse, had weighed Mr Vyse, grouped him, and finally dismissed him as having no possible bearing on the subject under discussion. That bleat of Tibby's infuriated Helen. But Helen was now down in the dining-room preparing a speech about political economy. At times her voice could be heard declaiming through the floor.

'But Mr Vyse is rather a wretched, weedy man, don't you think? Then there's Guy. That was a pitiful business. Besides'—shifting to the general—'everyone is the better for some regular work.'

Groans.

'I shall stick to it,' she continued, smiling. 'I am not saying it to educate you; it is what I really think. I believe that in the last century men have developed the desire for work, and they must not starve it. It's a new desire. It goes with a great deal that's bad, but in itself it's good, and I hope that for women, too, "not to work" will soon become as shocking as "not to be married" was a hundred years ago.'

'I have no experience of this profound desire to which you allude,' enunciated Tibby.

'Then we'll leave the subject till you do. I'm not going to rattle you round. Take your time. Only do think over the lives of the men you like most, and see how they've arranged them.'

‘I like Guy and Mr Vyse most,’ said Tibby faintly, and leant so far back in his chair that he extended in a horizontal line from knees to throat.

‘And don’t think I’m not serious because I don’t use the traditional arguments—making money, a sphere awaiting you, and so on—all of which are, for various reasons, cant.’ She sewed on. ‘I’m only your sister. I haven’t any authority over you, and I don’t want to have any. Just to put before you what I think the truth. You see’—she took off the pince-nez to which she had recently taken—’in a few years we shall be the same age practically, and I shall want you to help me. Men are so much nicer than women.’

‘Labouring under such a delusion, why do you not marry?’

‘I sometimes jolly well think I would if I got the chance.’

‘Has nobody arst you?’

‘Only ninnies.’

‘Do people ask Helen?’

‘Plentifully.’

‘Tell me about them.’

‘No.’

‘Tell me about your ninnies, then.’

‘They were men who had nothing better to do,’ said his sister, feeling that she was entitled to score this point. ‘So take warning: you must work, or else you must pretend to work, which is what I do. Work, work, work if you’d save your soul and your body. It is honestly a necessity, dear boy. Look at the Wilcoxes, look at Mr Pembroke. With all their defects of temper and understanding, such men give me more pleasure than many who are better equipped, and I think it is because they have worked regularly and honestly.’

‘Spare me the Wilcoxes,’ he moaned.

‘I shall not. They are the right sort.’

‘Oh, goodness me, Meg!’ he protested, suddenly sitting up, alert and angry. Tibby, for all his defects, had a genuine personality.

‘Well, they’re as near the right sort as you can imagine.’

‘No, no—oh, no!’

‘I was thinking of the younger son, whom I once classed as a ninny, but who came back so ill from Nigeria. He’s gone out there again, Evie Wilcox tells me—out to his duty.’

‘Duty’ always elicited a groan.

‘He doesn’t want the money, it is work he wants, though it is beastly work—dull country, dishonest natives, an eternal fidget over fresh water and food. A nation who can produce men of that sort may well be proud. No wonder England has become an Empire.’

‘*Empire*!’

‘I can’t bother over results,’ said Margaret, a little sadly. ‘They are too difficult for me. I can only look at the men. An Empire bores me, so far, but I can appreciate the heroism that builds it up. London bores me, but what thousands of splendid people are labouring to make London—’

‘What it is,’ he sneered.

‘What it is, worse luck. I want activity without civilization. How paradoxical! Yet I expect that is what we shall find in heaven.’

‘And I,’ said Tibby, ‘want civilization without activity, which, I expect, is what we shall find in the other place.’

‘You needn’t go as far as the other place, Tibbikins, if you want that. You can find it at Oxford.’

‘Stupid—’

‘If I’m stupid, get me back to the house-hunting. I’ll even live in Oxford if you like—North Oxford. I’ll live anywhere except Bournemouth, Torquay and Cheltenham. Oh yes, or Ilfracombe and Swanage and Tunbridge Wells and Surbiton and Bedford. There on no account.’

‘London, then.’

‘I agree, but Helen rather wants to get away from London. However, there’s no reason we shouldn’t have a house in the country and also a flat in town, provided we all stick together and contribute. Though of course—oh, how one does maunder on, and to think, to think of the people who are really poor. How do they live? Not to move about the world would kill me.’

As she spoke, the door was flung open, and Helen burst in in a state of extreme excitement.

‘Oh, my dears, what do you think? You’ll never guess. A woman’s been here asking me for her husband. Her *what*?’ (Helen was fond of supplying her own surprise.) ‘Yes, for her husband, and it really is so.’

‘Not anything to do with Bracknell?’ cried Margaret, who had lately taken on an unemployed of that name to clean the knives and boots.

‘I offered Bracknell, and he was rejected. So was Tibby. (Cheer up, Tibby!) It’s no one we know. I said: “Hunt, my good woman; have a good look round, hunt under the tables, poke up the chimney, shake out the antimacassars. Husband? Husband?” Oh, and she so magnificently dressed and tinkling like a chandelier.’

‘Now, Helen, what did happen really?’

‘What I say. I was, as it were, orating my speech. Annie opens the door like a fool, and shows a female straight in on me, with my mouth open. Then we began—very civilly. “I want my husband, what I have reason to believe is here.” No—how unjust one is. She said “whom”, not “what”. She got it perfectly. So I said, “Name, please?” and

she said, “Lan, Miss,” and there we were.’

‘Lan?’

‘Lan or Len. We were not nice about our vowels. Lanoline.’

‘But what an extraordinary—’

‘I said, “My good Mrs Lanoline, we have some grave misunderstanding here. Beautiful as I am, my modesty is even more remarkable than my beauty, and never, never has Mr Lanoline rested his eyes on mine.”’

‘I hope you were pleased,’ said Tibby.

‘Of course,’ Helen squeaked. ‘A perfectly delightful experience. Oh, Mrs Lanoline’s a dear—she asked for a husband as if he was an umbrella. She mislaid him Saturday afternoon—and for a long time suffered no inconvenience. But all night and all this morning her apprehensions grew. Breakfast didn’t seem the same—no, no more did lunch, and so she strolled up to Two, Wickham Place as being the most likely place for the missing article.’

‘But how on earth—’

‘Don’t begin how-on-earthing. “I know what I know,” she kept repeating, not uncivilly, but with extreme gloom. In vain I asked her what she did know. Some knew what others knew, and others didn’t, and if they didn’t then others again had better be careful. Oh dear, she was incompetent! She had a face like a silk-worm, and the dining-room reeks of orris-root. We chatted pleasantly a little about husbands, and I wondered where hers was too, and advised her to go to the police. She thanked me. We agreed that Mr Lanoline’s a notty, notty man, and hasn’t no business to go on the lardy-da. But I think she suspected me up to the last. Bags I writing to Aunt Juley about this. Now, Meg, remember—bags I.’

‘Bag it by all means,’ murmured Margaret, putting down her work. ‘I’m not sure that this is so funny, Helen. It means some horrible volcano smoking somewhere, doesn’t it?’

‘I don’t think so—she doesn’t really mind. The admirable creature isn’t capable of tragedy.’

‘Her husband may be, though,’ said Margaret, moving to the window.

‘Oh no, not likely. No one capable of tragedy would have married Mrs Lanoline.’

‘Was she pretty?’

‘Her figure may have been good once.’

The flats, their only outlook, hung like an ornate curtain between Margaret and the welter of London. Her thoughts turned sadly to house-hunting. Wickham Place had been so safe. She feared, fantastically, that her own little flock might be moving into turmoil and squalor, into nearer contact with such episodes as these.

‘Tibby and I have again been wondering where we’ll live next September,’ she said at last.

‘Tibby had better first wonder what he’ll do,’ retorted Helen; and that topic was resumed, but with acrimony. Then tea came, and after tea Helen went on preparing her speech, and Margaret prepared one, too, for they were going out to a discussion society on the morrow. But her thoughts were poisoned. Mrs Lanoline had risen out of the abyss, like a faint smell, a goblin footfall, telling of a life where love and hatred had both decayed.

XIV

THE MYSTERY, LIKE SO many mysteries, was explained. Next day, just as they were dressed to go out to dinner, a Mr Bast called. He was a clerk in the employment of the Porphyrion Fire Insurance Company. Thus much from his card. He had come ‘about the lady yesterday’. Thus much from Annie, who had shown him into the dining-room.

‘Cheers, children!’ cried Helen. ‘It’s Mr Lanoline.’

Even Tibby was interested. The three hurried downstairs, to find, not the gay dog they expected, but a young man, colourless, toneless, who had already the mournful eyes above a drooping moustache that are so common in London, and that haunt some streets of the city like accusing presences. One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit. Hints of robustness survived in him, more than a hint of primitive good looks, and Margaret, noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tailcoat and a couple of ideas. Culture had worked in her own case, but during the last few weeks she had doubted whether it humanized the majority, so wide and so widening is the gulf that stretches between the natural and the philosophic man, so many the good chaps who are wrecked in trying to cross it. She knew this type very well—the vague aspirations, the mental dishonesty, the familiarity with the outsides of books. She knew the very tones in which he would address her. She was only unprepared for an example of her own visiting-card.

‘You wouldn’t remember giving me this, Miss Schlegel?’ said he, uneasily familiar.

‘No; I can’t say I do.’

‘Well, that was how it happened, you see.’

‘Where did we meet, Mr Bast? For the minute I don’t remember.’

‘It was a concert at the Queen’s Hall. I think you will recollect,’ he added pretentiously, ‘when I tell you that it

included a performance of the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven.'

'We hear the Fifth practically every time it's done, so I'm not sure—do you remember, Helen?'

'Was it the time the sandy cat walked round the balustrade?'

He thought not.

'Then I don't remember. That's the only Beethoven I ever remember specially.'

'And you, if I may say so, took away my umbrella, inadvertently of course.'

'Likely enough,' Helen laughed, 'for I steal umbrellas even of-tener than I hear Beethoven. Did you get it back?'

'Yes, thank you, Miss Schlegel.'

'The mistake arose out of my card, did it?' interposed Margaret.

'Yes, the mistake arose—it was a mistake.'

'The lady who called here yesterday thought that you were calling too, and that she would find you?' she continued, pushing him forward, for, though he had promised an explanation, he seemed unable to give one.

'That's so, calling too—a mistake.'

'Then why—?' began Helen, but Margaret laid a hand on her arm.

'I said to my wife,' he continued more rapidly—'I said to Mrs Bast, "I have to pay a call on some friends," and Mrs Bast said to me, "Do go." While I was gone, however, she wanted me on important business, and thought I had come here, owing to the card, and so came after me, and I beg to tender my apologies, and hers as well, for any inconvenience we may have inadvertently caused you.'

'No inconvenience,' said Helen; 'but I still don't understand.'

An air of evasion characterized Mr Bast. He explained again, but was obviously lying, and Helen didn't see why he should get off. She had the cruelty of youth. Neglecting her sister's pressure, she said: 'I still don't understand. When did you say you paid this call?'

'Call? What call?' said he, staring as if her question had been a foolish one, a favourite device of those in midstream.

'This afternoon call.'

'In the afternoon, of course!' he replied, and looked at Tibby to see how the repartee went. But Tibby, himself a repartee, was unsympathetic, and said, 'Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon?'

'S—Saturday.'

'Really!' said Helen; 'and you were still calling on Sunday, when your wife came here. A long visit.'

'I don't call that fair,' said Mr Bast, going scarlet and handsome. There was fight in his eyes. 'I know what you mean, and it isn't so.'

'Oh, don't let us mind,' said Margaret, distressed again by odours from the abyss.

'It was something else,' he asserted, his elaborate manner breaking down. 'I was somewhere else to what you think, so there!'

'It was good of you to come and explain,' she said. 'The rest is naturally no concern of ours.'

'Yes, but I want—I wanted—have you ever read *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*?'[1]

Margaret nodded.

'It's a beautiful book. I wanted to get back to the earth, don't you see, like Richard does in the end. Or have you ever read Stevenson's *Prince Otto*?'[2]

Helen and Tibby groaned gently.

'That's another beautiful book. You get back to the earth in that. I wanted—' He mouthed affectedly. Then through the mists of his culture came a hard fact, hard as a pebble. 'I walked all the Saturday night,' said Leonard. 'I walked.' A thrill of approval ran through the sisters. But culture closed in again. He asked whether they had ever read E. V. Lucas's *Open Road*.

Said Helen, 'No doubt it's another beautiful book, but I'd rather hear about *your* road.'

'Oh, I walked.'

'How far?'

'I don't know, nor for how long. It got too dark to see my watch.'

'Were you walking alone, may I ask?'

'Yes,' he said, straightening himself; 'but we'd been talking it over at the office. There's been a lot of talk at the office lately about these things. The fellows there said one steers by the Pole Star, and I looked it up in the celestial atlas, but once out of doors everything gets so mixed—'

'Don't talk to me about the Pole Star,' interrupted Helen, who was becoming interested. 'I know its little ways. It goes round and round, and you go round after it.'

'Well, I lost it entirely. First of all the street-lamps, then the trees, and towards morning it got cloudy.'

Tibby, who preferred his comedy undiluted, slipped from the room. He knew that this fellow would never attain to poetry, and did not want to hear him trying. Margaret and Helen remained. Their brother influenced them more than they knew: in his absence they were stirred to enthusiasm more easily.

'Where did you start from?' cried Margaret. 'Do tell us more.'

'I took the underground to Wimbledon. As I came out of the office I said to myself: "I must have a walk once in a way. If I don't take this walk now, I shall never take it." I had a bit of dinner at Wimbledon, and then—'

'But not good country there, is it?'

'It was gas lamps for hours. Still, I had all the night, and being out was the great thing. I did get into woods, too,

presently.'

'Yes, go on,' said Helen.

'You've no idea how difficult uneven ground is when it's dark.'

'Did you actually go off the roads?'

'Oh, yes. I always meant to go off the roads, but the worst of it is that it's more difficult to find one's way.'

'Mr Bast, you're a born adventurer,' laughed Margaret. 'No professional athlete would have attempted what you've done. It's a wonder your walk didn't end in a broken neck. What ever did your wife say?'

'Professional athletes never move without lanterns and compasses,' said Helen. 'Besides, they can't walk. It tires them. Go on.'

'I felt like R. L. S. You probably remember how in *Virginibus*—'[3]

'Yes, but the wood. This 'ere wood. How did you get out of it?'

'I managed one wood, and found a road the other side which went a good bit uphill. I rather fancy it was those North Downs, for the road went off into grass, and I got into another wood. That was awful, with gorse bushes. I did wish I'd never come, but suddenly it got light—just while I seemed going under one tree. Then I found a road down to a station, and took the first train I could back to London.'

'But was the dawn wonderful?' asked Helen.

With unforgettable sincerity he replied: 'No.' The word flew again like a pebble from the sling. Down toppled all that had seemed ignoble or literary in his talk, down toppled tiresome R. L. S. and the 'love of the earth' and his silk top-hat. In the presence of these women Leonard had arrived, and he spoke with a flow, an exultation, that he had seldom known.

'The dawn was only gray, it was nothing to mention—'

'Just a gray evening turned upside down. I know.'

'—and I was too tired to lift up my head to look at it, and so cold too. I'm glad I did it, and yet at the time it bored me more than I can say. And besides—you can believe me or not as you choose—I was very hungry. That dinner at Wimbledon—I meant it to last me all night like other dinners. I never thought that walking would make such a difference. Why, when you're walking you want, as it were, a breakfast and luncheon and tea during the night as well, and I'd nothing but a packet of Woodbines. Lord, I did feel bad! Looking back, it wasn't what you may call enjoyment. It was more a case of sticking to it. I did stick. I—I was determined. Oh, hang it all! What's the good—I mean, the good of living in a room for ever? There one goes on day after day, same old game, same up and down to town, until you forget there is any other game. You ought to see once in a way what's going on outside, if it's only nothing particular after all.'

'I should just think you ought,' said Helen, sitting on the edge of the table.

The sound of a lady's voice recalled him from sincerity, and he said: 'Curious it should all come about from reading something of Richard Jefferies.'[4]

'Excuse me, Mr Bast, but you're wrong there. It didn't. It came from something far greater.'

But she could not stop him. Borrow[5] was imminent after Jefferies—Borrow, Thoreau and sorrow. R. L. S. brought up the rear, and the outburst ended in a swamp of books. No disrespect to these great names. The fault is ours, not theirs. They mean us to use them for signposts, and are not to blame if, in our weakness, we mistake the signpost for the destination. And Leonard had reached the destination. He had visited the country of Surrey when darkness covered its amenities, and its cosy villas had re-entered ancient night. Every twelve hours this miracle happens, but he had troubled to go and see for himself. Within his cramped little mind dwelt something that was greater than Jefferies's books—the spirit that led Jefferies to write them; and his dawn, though revealing nothing but monotones, was part of the eternal sunrise that shows George Borrow Stonehenge.

'Then you don't think I was foolish?' he asked, becoming again the naïve and sweet-tempered boy for whom nature had intended him.

'Heavens, no!' replied Margaret.

'Heaven help us if we do!' replied Helen.

'I'm very glad you say that. Now, my wife would never understand—not if I explained for days.'

'No, it wasn't foolish!' cried Helen, her eyes aflame. 'You've pushed back the boundaries; I think it splendid of you.'

'You've not been content to dream as we have—'

'Though we have walked, too—'

'I must show you a picture upstairs—'

Here the door-bell rang. The hansom had come to take them to their evening party.

'Oh, bother, not to say dash—I had forgotten we were dining out; but do, do come round again and have a talk.'

'Yes, you must—do,' echoed Margaret.

Leonard, with extreme sentiment, replied: 'No, I shall not. It's better like this.'

'Why better?' asked Margaret.

'No, it is better not to risk a second interview. I shall always look back on this talk with you as one of the finest things in my life. Really. I mean this. We can never repeat. It has done me real good, and there we had better leave it.'

'That's rather a sad view of life, surely.'

'Things so often get spoiled.'

'I know,' flashed Helen, 'but people don't.'

He could not understand this. He continued in a vein which mingled true imagination and false. What he said wasn't wrong, but it wasn't right, and a false note jarred. One little twist, they felt, and the instrument might be in tune. One little strain, and it might be silent for ever. He thanked the ladies very much, but he would not call again. There was a moment's awkwardness, and then Helen said: 'Go, then; perhaps you know best; but never forget you're better than Jefferies.' And he went. Their hansom caught him up at the corner, passed with a waving of hands, and vanished with its accomplished load into the evening.

London was beginning to illuminate herself against the night. Electric lights sizzled and jagged in the main thoroughfares, gas lamps in the side- streets glimmered a canary gold or green. The sky was a crimson battlefield of spring, but London was not afraid. Her smoke mitigated the splendour, and the clouds down Oxford Street were a delicately painted ceiling, which adorned while it did not distract. She has never known the clear-cut armies of the purer air. Leonard hurried through her tinted corridors, very much part of the picture. His was a gray life, and to brighten it he had ruled off a few corners for Romance. The Miss Schlegels—or, to speak more accurately, his interview with them—were to fill such a corner, nor was it by any means the first time that he had talked intimately to strangers. The habit was analogous to a debauch, an outlet, though the worst of outlets, for instincts that would not be denied. Terrifying him, it would beat down his suspicions and prudence until he was confiding secrets to people whom he had scarcely seen. It brought him many fears and some pleasant memories. Perhaps the keenest happiness he had ever known was during a railway journey to Cambridge, where a decent-mannered undergraduate had spoken to him. They had got into conversation, and gradually Leonard flung reticence aside, told some of his domestic troubles, and hinted at the rest. The undergraduate, supposing they could start a friendship, asked him to 'coffee after hall', which he accepted, but afterwards grew shy, and took care not to stir from the commercial hotel where he lodged. He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyrion, still less with Jacky, and people with fuller, happier lives are slow to understand this. To the Schlegels, as to the undergraduate, he was an interesting creature, of whom they wanted to see more. But they to him were denizens of Romance, who must keep to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames.

His behaviour over Margaret's visiting-card had been typical. His had scarcely been a tragic marriage. Where there is no money and no inclination to violence tragedy cannot be generated. He could not leave his wife, and he did not want to hit her. Petulance and squalor was enough. Here 'that card' had come in. Leonard, though furtive, was untidy, and left it lying about. Jacky found it, and then began, 'What's that card, eh?' 'Yes, don't you wish you knew what that card was?' 'Len, who's Miss Schlegel?' etc. Months passed, and the card, now as a joke, now as a grievance, was bandied about, getting dirtier and dirtier. It followed them when they moved from Camelia Road to Tulse Hill. It was submitted to third parties. A few inches of pasteboard, it became the battlefield on which the souls of Leonard and his wife contended. Why did he not say, 'A lady took my umbrella, another gave me this that I might call for my umbrella'? Because Jacky would have disbelieved him? Partly, but chiefly because he was sentimental. No affection gathered round the card, but it symbolized the life of culture, that Jacky should never spoil. At night he would say to himself: 'Well, at all events, she doesn't know about that card. Yah! Done her there!'

Poor Jacky! She was not a bad sort, and had a great deal to bear. She drew her own conclusion—she was only capable of drawing one conclusion—and in the fullness of time she acted upon it. All the Friday Leonard had refused to speak to her, and had spent the evening observing the stars. On the Saturday he went up, as usual, to town, but he came not back Saturday night, nor Sunday morning, nor Sunday afternoon. The inconvenience grew intolerable, and though she was now of a retiring habit, and shy of women, she went up to Wickham Place. Leonard returned in her absence. The card, the fatal card, was gone from the pages of Ruskin, and he guessed what had happened.

'Well?' he had exclaimed, greeting her with peals of laughter. 'I know where you've been, but you don't know where I've been.'

Jacky sighed, said, 'Len, I do think you might explain,' and resumed domesticity.

Explanations were difficult at this stage, and Leonard was too silly—or, it is tempting to write, too sound a chap to attempt them. His reticence was not entirely the shoddy article that a business life promotes, the reticence that pretends that nothing is something, and hides behind the *Daily Telegraph*. The adventurer, also, is reticent, and it is an adventure for a clerk to walk for a few hours in darkness. You may laugh at him, you who have slept nights out on the veldt, with your rifle beside you and all the atmosphere of adventure pat. And you also may laugh who think adventures silly. But do not be surprised if Leonard is shy whenever he meets you, and if the Schlegels rather than Jacky hear about the dawn.

That the Schlegels had not thought him foolish became a permanent joy. He was at his best when he thought of them. It buoyed him as he journeyed home beneath fading heavens. Somehow the barriers of wealth had fallen, and there had been—he could not phrase it—a general assertion of the wonder of the world. 'My conviction,' says the mystic, 'gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it,'[6] and they had agreed that there was something beyond life's daily gray. He took off his top-hat and smoothed it thoughtfully. He had hitherto supposed the unknown to be books, literature, clever conversation, culture. One raised oneself by study, and got upsides with the world. But in that quick interchange a new light dawned. Was that 'something' walking in the dark among the suburban hills?

He discovered that he was going bareheaded down Regent Street. London came back with a rush. Few were

about at this hour, but all whom he passed looked at him with a hostility that was the more impressive because it was unconscious. He put his hat on. It was too big; his head disappeared like a pudding into a basin, the ears bending outwards at the touch of the curly brim. He wore it a little backwards, and its effect was greatly to elongate the face and to bring out the distance between the eyes and the moustache. Thus equipped, he escaped criticism. No one felt uneasy as he tittuped along the pavements, the heart of a man ticking fast in his chest.

XV

THE SISTERS WENT OUT to dinner full of their adventure, and when they were both full of the same subject there were few dinner parties that could stand up against them. This particular one, which was all ladies, had more kick in it than most, but succumbed after a struggle. Helen at one part of the table, Margaret at the other, would talk of Mr Bast and of no one else, and somewhere about the entrée their monologues collided, fell ruining, and became common property. Nor was this all. The dinner party was really an informal discussion club; there was a paper after it, read amid coffee-cups and laughter in the drawing-room, but dealing more or less thoughtfully with some topic of general interest. After the paper came a debate, and in this debate Mr Bast also figured, appearing now as a bright spot in civilization, now as a dark spot, according to the temperament of the speaker. The subject of the paper had been 'How ought I to dispose of my money?' the reader professing to be a millionaire on the point of death, inclined to bequeath her fortune for the foundation of local art galleries, but open to conviction from other sources. The various parts had been assigned beforehand, and some of the speeches were amusing. The hostess assumed the ungrateful role of 'the millionaire's eldest son', and implored her expiring parent not to dislocate society by allowing such vast sums to pass out of the family. Money was the fruit of self-denial, and the second generation had a right to profit by the self-denial of the first. What right had 'Mr Bast' to profit? The National Gallery was good enough for the likes of him. After property had had its say—a say that is necessarily ungracious—the various philanthropists stepped forward. Something must be done for 'Mr Bast': his conditions must be improved without impairing his independence; he must have a free library, or free tennis-courts; his rent must be paid in such a way that he did not know it was being paid; it must be made worth his while to join the Territorials; he must be forcibly parted from his uninspiring wife, the money going to her as compensation; he must be assigned a Twin Star, some member of the leisured classes who would watch over him ceaselessly (groans from Helen); he must be given food but no clothes, clothes but no food, a third-return ticket to Venice, without either food or clothes when he arrived there. In short, he might be given anything and everything so long as it was not the money itself.

And here Margaret interrupted.

'Order, order, Miss Schlegel!' said the reader of the paper. 'You are here, I understand, to advise me in the interests of the Society for the Preservation of Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty. I cannot have you speaking out of your role. It makes my poor head go round, and I think you forget that I am very ill.'

'Your head won't go round if only you'll listen to my argument,' said Margaret. 'Why not give him the money itself? You're supposed to have about thirty thousand a year.'

'Have I? I thought I had a million.'

'Wasn't a million your capital? Dear me! We ought to have settled that. Still, it doesn't matter. Whatever you've got, I order you to give as many poor men as you can three hundred a year each.'

'But that would be pauperizing them,' said an earnest girl, who liked the Schlegels, but thought them a little unspiritual at times.

'Not if you gave them so much. A big windfall would not pauperize a man. It is these little driblets, distributed among too many, that do the harm. Money's educational. It's far more educational than the things it buys.' There was a protest. 'In a sense,' added Margaret, but the protest continued. 'Well, isn't the most civilized thing going the man who has learned to wear his income properly?'

'Exactly what your Mr Basts won't do.'

'Give them a chance. Give them money. Don't dole them out poetry, books and railway tickets like babies. Give them the wherewithal to buy these things. When your socialism comes it may be different, and we may think in terms of commodities instead of cash. Till it comes give people cash for it is the warp of civilization, whatever the woof may be. The imagination ought to play upon money and realize it vividly, for it's the—the second most important thing in the world. It is so slurred over and hushed up, there is so little clear thinking—oh, political economy, of course, but so few of us think clearly about our own private incomes, and admit that independent thoughts are in nine cases out of ten the result of independent means. Money: give Mr Bast money, and don't bother about his ideals. He'll pick up those for himself.'

She leant back while the more earnest members of the club began to misconstrue her. The female mind, though cruelly practical in daily life, cannot bear to hear ideals belittled in conversation, and Miss Schlegel was asked how ever she could say such dreadful things, and what it would profit Mr Bast if he gained the whole world and lost his own soul. She answered, Nothing, but he would not gain his soul until he had gained a little of the world. Then

they said, No, they did not believe it, and she admitted that an overworked clerk may save his soul in the superterrestrial sense, where the effort will be taken for the deed, but she denied that he will ever explore the spiritual resources of this world, will ever know the rarer joys of the body, or attain to clear and passionate intercourse with his fellows. Others had attacked the fabric of society—property, interest, etc.; she only fixed her eyes on a few human beings, to see how, under present conditions, they could be made happier. Doing good to humanity was useless: the many-coloured efforts thereto spreading over the vast area like films and resulting in a universal gray. To do good to one, or, as in this case, to a few, was the utmost she dare hope for.

Between the idealists and the political economists, Margaret had a bad time. Disagreeing elsewhere, they agreed in disowning her, and in keeping the administration of the millionaire's money in their own hands. The earnest girl brought forward a scheme of 'personal supervision and mutual help', the effect of which was to alter poor people until they became exactly like people who were not so poor. The hostess pertinently remarked that she, as eldest son, might surely rank among the millionaire's legatees. Margaret weakly admitted the claim, and another claim was at once set up by Helen, who declared that she had been the millionaire's housemaid for over forty years, overfed and underpaid; was nothing to be done for her, so corpulent and poor? The millionaire then read out her last will and testament, in which she left the whole of her fortune to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Then she died. The serious parts of the discussion had been of higher merit than the playful—in a men's debate is the reverse more general?—but the meeting broke up hilariously enough, and a dozen happy ladies dispersed to their homes.

Helen and Margaret walked the earnest girl as far as Battersea Bridge Station, arguing copiously all the way. When she had gone they were conscious of an alleviation, and of the great beauty of the evening. They turned back towards Oakley Street. The lamps and the plane trees, following the line of the embankment, struck a note of dignity that is rare in English cities. The seats, almost deserted, were here and there occupied by gentlefolk in evening dress, who had strolled out from the houses behind to enjoy fresh air and the whisper of the rising tide. There is something continental about Chelsea Embankment. It is an open space used rightly, a blessing more frequent in Germany than here. As Margaret and Helen sat down, the city behind them seemed to be a vast theatre, an opera-house in which some endless trilogy was performing, and they themselves a pair of satisfied subscribers, who did not mind losing a little of the second act.

'Cold?'

'No.'

'Tired?'

'Doesn't matter.'

The earnest girl's train rumbled away over the bridge.

'I say, Helen—'

'Well?'

'Are we really going to follow up Mr Bast?'

'I don't know.'

'I think we won't.'

'As you like.'

'It's no good, I think, unless you really mean to know people. The discussion brought that home to me. We got on well enough with him in a spirit of excitement, but think of rational intercourse. We mustn't play at friendship. No, it's no good.'

'There's Mrs Lanoline, too,' Helen yawned. 'So dull.'

'Just so, and possibly worse than dull.'

'I should like to know how he got hold of your card.'

'But he said—something about a concert and an umbrella—'

'Then did the card see the wife—'

'Helen, come to bed.'

'No, just a little longer, it is so beautiful. Tell me; oh yes; did you say money is the warp of the world?'

'Yes.'

'Then what's the woof?'

'Very much what one chooses,' said Margaret. 'It's something that isn't money—one can't say more.'

'Walking at night?'

'Probably.'

'For Tibby, Oxford?'

'It seems so.'

'For you?'

'Now that we have to leave Wickham Place, I begin to think it's that. For Mrs Wilcox it was certainly Howards End.'

One's own name will carry immense distances. Mr Wilcox, who was sitting with friends many seats away, heard his, rose to his feet, and strolled along towards the speakers.

'It is sad to suppose that places may ever be more important than people,' continued Margaret.

'Why, Meg? They're so much nicer generally. I'd rather think of that forester's house in Pomerania than of the fat Herr Förstmeister who lived in it.'

‘I believe we shall come to care about people less and less, Helen. The more people one knows the easier it becomes to replace them. It’s one of the curses of London. I quite expect to end my life caring most for a place.’

Here Mr Wilcox reached them. It was several weeks since they had met.

‘How do you do?’ he cried. ‘I thought I recognized your voices. What ever are you both doing down here?’

His tones were protective. He implied that one ought not to sit out on Chelsea Embankment without a male escort. Helen resented this but Margaret accepted it as part of the good man’s equipment.

‘What an age it is since I’ve seen you, Mr Wilcox. I met Evie in the Tube, though, lately. I hope you have good news of your son.’

‘Paul?’ said Mr Wilcox, extinguishing his cigarette, and sitting down between them. ‘Oh, Paul’s all right. We had a line from Madeira. He’ll be at work again by now.’

‘Ugh—’ said Helen, shuddering from complex causes.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Isn’t the climate of Nigeria too horrible?’

‘Someone’s got to go,’ he said simply. ‘England will never keep her trade overseas unless she is prepared to make sacrifices. Unless we get firm in West Africa, Ger—untold complications may follow.[1] Now tell me all your news.’

‘Oh, we’ve had a splendid evening,’ cried Helen, who always woke up at the advent of a visitor. ‘We belong to a kind of club that reads papers, Margaret and I—all women, but there is a discussion after. This evening it was on how one ought to leave one’s money—whether to one’s family, or to the poor, and if so how—oh, most interesting.’

The man of business smiled. Since his wife’s death he had almost doubled his income. He was an important figure at last, a reassuring name on company prospectuses, and life had treated him very well. The world seemed in his grasp as he listened to the river Thames, which still flowed inland from the sea. So wonderful to the girls, it held no mysteries for him. He had helped to shorten its long tidal trough by taking shares in the lock at Teddington, and, if he and other capitalists thought good, some day it could be shortened again. With a good dinner inside him and an amiable but academic woman on either flank, he felt that his hands were on all the ropes of life, and that what he did not know could not be worth knowing.

‘Sounds a most original entertainment!’ he exclaimed, and laughed in his pleasant way. ‘I wish Evie would go to that sort of thing. But she hasn’t the time. She’s taken to breed Aberdeen terriers—jolly little dogs.’

‘I expect we’d better be doing the same, really.’

‘We pretend we’re improving ourselves, you see,’ said Helen a little sharply, for the Wilcox glamour is not of the kind that returns, and she had bitter memories of the days when a speech such as he had just made would have impressed her favourably. ‘We suppose it a good thing to waste an evening once a fortnight over a debate, but, as my sister says, it may be better to breed dogs.’

‘Not at all. I don’t agree with your sister. There’s nothing like a debate to teach one quickness. I often wish I had gone in for them when I was a youngster. It would have helped me no end.’

‘Quickness—?’

‘Yes. Quickness in argument. Time after time I’ve missed scoring a point because the other man has had the gift of the gab and I haven’t. Oh, I haven’t. Oh, I believe in these discussions.’

The patronizing tone, thought Margaret, came well enough from a man who was old enough to be their father. She had always maintained that Mr Wilcox had a charm. In times of sorrow or emotion his inadequacy had pained her, but it was pleasant to listen to him now, and to watch his thick brown moustache and high forehead confronting the stars. But Helen was nettled. The aim of *their* debates, she implied, was Truth.

‘Oh yes, it doesn’t much matter what subject you take,’ said he.

Margaret laughed and said, ‘But this is going to be far better than the debate itself.’ Helen recovered herself and laughed too. ‘No, I won’t go on,’ she declared. ‘I’ll just put our special case to Mr Wilcox.’

‘About Mr Bast? Yes, do. He’ll be more lenient to a special case.’

‘But, Mr Wilcox, do first light another cigarette. It’s this. We’ve just come across a young fellow, who’s evidently very poor, and who seems interest—’

‘What’s his profession?’

‘Clerk.’

‘What in?’

‘Do you remember, Margaret?’

‘Porphyrion Fire Insurance Company.’

‘Oh yes; the nice people who gave Aunt Juley a new hearth-rug. He seems interesting, in some ways very, and one wishes one could help him. He is married to a wife whom he doesn’t seem to care for much. He likes books, and what one may roughly call adventure, and if he had a chance—but he is so poor. He lives a life where all the money is apt to go on nonsense and clothes. One is so afraid that circumstances will be too strong for him and that he will sink. Well, he got mixed up in our debate. He wasn’t the subject of it, but it seemed to bear on his point. Suppose a millionaire died, and desired to leave money to help such a man. How should he be helped? Should he be given three hundred pounds a year direct, which was Margaret’s plan? Most of them thought this would pauperize him. Should he and those like him be given free libraries? I said “No!” He doesn’t want more books to read, but to read books rightly. My suggestion was he should be given something every year towards a summer holiday, but then there is his wife, and they said she would have to go too. Nothing seemed quite right! Now what

do you think? Imagine that you were a millionaire, and wanted to help the poor. What would you do?'

Mr Wilcox, whose fortune was not so very far below the standard indicated, laughed exuberantly. 'My dear Miss Schlegel, I will not rush in where your sex has been unable to tread. I will not add another plan to the numerous excellent ones that have been already suggested. My only contribution is this: let your young friend clear out of the Porphyrion Fire Insurance Company with all possible speed.'

'Why?' said Margaret.

He lowered his voice. 'This is between friends. It'll be in the Receiver's hands before Christmas. It'll smash,' he added, thinking that she had not understood.

'Dear me, Helen, listen to that. And he'll have to get another place!'

'*Will* have? Let him leave the ship before it sinks. Let him get one now.'

'Rather than wait to make sure?'

'Decidedly.'

'Why's that?'

Again the Olympian laugh, and the lowered voice. 'Naturally the man who's in a situation when he applies stands a better chance, is in a stronger position, than the man who isn't. It looks as if he's worth something. I know by myself (this is letting you into the state secrets) it affects an employer greatly. Human nature, I'm afraid.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' murmured Margaret, while Helen said: 'Our human nature appears to be the other way round. We employ people because they're unemployed. The boot man, for instance.'

'And how does he clean the boots?'

'Not well,' confessed Margaret.

'There you are!'

'Then do you really advise us to tell this youth—?'

'I advise nothing,' he interrupted, glancing up and down the Embankment, in case his indiscretion had been overheard. 'I oughtn't to have spoken—but I happen to know, being more or less behind the scenes. The Porphyrion's a bad, bad concern—now, don't say I said so. It's outside the Tariff Ring.'[2]

'Certainly I won't say. In fact I don't know what that means.'

'I thought an insurance company never smashed,' was Helen's contribution. 'Don't the others always run in and save them?'

'You're thinking of reinsurance,' said Mr Wilcox mildly. 'It is exactly there that the Porphyrion is weak. It has tried to undercut, has been badly hit by a long series of small fires, and it hasn't been able to reinsure. I'm afraid that public companies don't save one another for love.'

'"Human nature", I suppose,' quoted Helen, and he laughed and agreed that it was. When Margaret said that she supposed that clerks, like everyone else, found it extremely difficult to get situations in these days, he replied, 'Yes, extremely,' and rose to rejoin his friends. He knew by his own office—seldom a vacant post, and hundreds of applicants for it; at present no vacant post.

'And how's Howards End looking?' said Margaret, wishing to change the subject before they parted. Mr Wilcox was a little apt to think one wanted to get something out of him.

'It's let.'

'Really. And you wandering homeless in long-haired Chelsea? How strange are the ways of fate!'

'No; it's let unfurnished. We've moved.'

'Why, I thought of you both as anchored there for ever. Evie never told me.'

'I dare say when you met Evie the thing wasn't settled. We only moved a week ago. Paul has rather a feeling for the old place, and we held on for him to have his holiday there; but, really, it is impossibly small. Endless drawbacks. I forget whether you've been up to it?'

'As far as the house, never.'

'Well, Howards End is one of those converted farms. They don't really do, spend what you will on them. We messed away with a garage all among the wych-elm roots, and last year we enclosed a bit of the meadow and attempted a rockery. Evie got rather keen on Alpine plants. But it didn't do—no, it didn't do. You remember, or your sister will remember, the farm with those abominable guineafowls, and the hedge that the old woman never would cut properly, so that it all went thin at the bottom. And, inside the house, the beams—and the staircase through a door—picturesque enough, but not a place to live in.' He glanced over the parapet cheerfully. 'Full tide. And the position wasn't right either. The neighbourhood's getting suburban. Either be in London or out of it, I say; so we've taken a house in Ducie Street, close to Sloane Street, and a place right down in Shropshire—Oniton Grange. Ever heard of Oniton? Do come and see us—right away from everywhere, up towards Wales.'

'What a change!' said Margaret. But the change was in her own voice, which had become most sad. 'I can't imagine Howards End or Hilton without you.'

'Hilton isn't without us.' he replied. 'Charles is there still.'

'Still?' said Margaret, who had not kept up with the Charleses. 'But I thought he was still at Epsom. They were furnishing that Christmas—one Christmas. How everything alters! I used to admire Mrs Charles from our windows very often. Wasn't it Epsom?'

'Yes, but they moved eighteen months ago. Charles, the good chap'—his voice dropped—'thought I should be lonely. I didn't want him to move, but he would, and took a house at the other end of Hilton, down by the Six Hills. He had a motor, too. There they all are, a very jolly party—he and she and the two grandchildren.'

‘I manage other people’s affairs so much better than they manage them themselves,’ said Margaret as they shook hands. ‘When you moved out of Howards End, I should have moved Mr Charles Wilcox into it. I should have kept so remarkable a place in the family.’

‘So it is,’ he replied. ‘I haven’t sold it, and don’t mean to.’

‘No; but none of you are there.’

‘Oh, we’ve got a splendid tenant—Hamar Bryce, an invalid. If Charles ever wanted it—but he won’t. Dolly is so dependent on modern conveniences. No, we have all decided against Howards End. We like it in a way, but now we feel that it is neither one thing nor the other. One must have one thing or the other.’

‘And some people are lucky enough to have both. You’re doing yourself proud, Mr Wilcox. My congratulations.’

‘And mine,’ said Helen.

‘Do remind Evie to come and see us—Two, Wickham Place. We shan’t be there very long, either.’

‘You, too, on the move?’

‘Next September,’ Margaret sighed.

‘Everyone moving! Good-bye.’

The tide had begun to ebb. Margaret leant over the parapet and watched it sadly. Mr Wilcox had forgotten his wife, Helen her lover; she herself was probably forgetting. Everyone moving. Is it worth while attempting the past when there is this continual flux even in the hearts of men?

Helen roused her by saying: ‘What a prosperous vulgarian Mr Wilcox has grown! I have very little use for him in these days. However, he did tell us about the Porphyrion. Let us write to Mr Bast as soon as ever we get home, and tell him to clear out of it at once.’

‘Do; yes, that’s worth doing. Let us.’

‘Let’s ask him to tea.’

XVI

Leonard accepted the invitation to tea next Saturday. But he was right: the visit proved a conspicuous failure.

‘Sugar?’ said Margaret.

‘Cake?’ said Helen. ‘The big cake or the little deadlies? I’m afraid you thought my letter rather odd, but we’ll explain—we aren’t odd, really—nor affected, really. We’re over-expressive: that’s all.’

As a lady’s lap-dog Leonard did not excel. He was not an Italian, still less a Frenchman, in whose blood there runs the very spirit of persiflage and of gracious repartee. His wit was the Cockney’s; it opened no doors into imagination, and Helen was drawn up short by ‘The more a lady has to say, the better’, administered waggishly.

‘Oh yes,’ she said.

‘Ladies brighten—’

‘Yes, I know. The darlings are regular sunbeams. Let me give you a plate.’

‘How do you like your work?’ interposed Margaret.

He, too, was drawn up short. He would not have these women prying into his work. They were Romance, and so was the room to which he had at last penetrated, with the queer sketches of people bathing upon its walls, and so were the very teacups, with their delicate borders of wild strawberries. But he would not let Romance interfere with his life. There is the devil to pay then.

‘Oh, well enough,’ he answered.

‘Your company is the Porphyrion, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, that’s so’—becoming rather offended. ‘It’s funny how things get round.’

‘Why funny?’ asked Helen, who did not follow the workings of his mind. ‘It was written as large as life on your card, and considering we wrote to you there, and that you replied on the stamped paper—’

‘Would you call the Porphyrion one of the big insurance companies?’ pursued Margaret.

‘It depends what you call big.’

‘I mean by big a solid, well-established concern, that offers a reasonably good career to its employees.’

‘I couldn’t say—some would tell you one thing and others another,’ said the employee uneasily. ‘For my own part’—he shook his head—’I only believe half I hear. Not that even; it’s safer. Those clever ones come to the worse grief, I’ve often noticed. Ah, you can’t be too careful.’

He drank, and wiped his moustache, which was going to be one of those moustaches that always droop into teacups—more bother than they’re worth, surely, and not fashionable either.

‘I quite agree, and that’s why I was curious to know: is it a solid, well-established concern?’

Leonard had no idea. He understood his own corner of the machine, but nothing beyond it. He desired to confess neither knowledge nor ignorance, and under these circumstances another motion of the head seemed safest. To him, as to the British public, the Porphyrion was the Porphyrion of the advertisement—a giant, in the classical style,[1] but draped sufficiently, who held in one hand a burning torch, and pointed with the other to St Paul’s and Windsor Castle. A large sum of money was inscribed below, and you drew your own conclusions. This giant caused

Leonard to do arithmetic and write letters, to explain the regulations to new clients, and re-explain them to old ones. A giant was of an impulsive morality—one knew that much. He would pay for Mrs Munt's hearth-rug with ostentatious haste, a large claim he would repudiate quietly, and fight court by court. But his true fighting weight, his antecedents, his amours with other members of the commercial Pantheon—all these were as uncertain to ordinary mortals as were the escapades of Zeus. While the gods are powerful, we learn little about them. It is only in the days of their decadence that a strong light beats into heaven.

'We were told the Porphyrion's no go,' blurted Helen. 'We wanted to tell you; that's why we wrote.'

'A friend of ours did think that it is insufficiently reinsured,' said Margaret.

Now Leonard had his clue. He must praise the Porphyrion. 'You can tell your friend,' he said, 'that he's quite wrong.'

'Oh, good!'

The young man coloured a little. In his circle to be wrong was fatal. The Miss Schlegels did not mind being wrong. They were genuinely glad that they had been misinformed. To them nothing was fatal but evil.

'Wrong, so to speak,' he added.

'How "so to speak"?'

'I mean I wouldn't say he's right altogether.'

But this was a blunder. 'Then he is right partly,' said the elder woman, quick as lightning.

Leonard replied that everyone was right partly, if it came to that.

'Mr Bast, I don't understand business, and I dare say my questions are stupid, but can you tell me what makes a concern "right" or "wrong"?'

Leonard sat back with a sigh.

'Our friend, who is also a businessman, was so positive. He said before Christmas—'

'And advised you to clear out of it,' concluded Helen. 'But I don't see why he should know better than you do.'

Leonard rubbed his hands. He was tempted to say that he knew nothing about the thing at all. But a commercial training was too strong for him. Nor could he say it was a bad thing, for this would be giving it away; nor yet that it was good, for this would be giving it away equally. He attempted to suggest that it was something between the two, with vast possibilities in either direction, but broke down under the gaze of four sincere eyes. As yet he scarcely distinguished between the two sisters. One was more beautiful and more lively, but 'the Miss Schlegels' still remained a composite Indian god, whose waving arms and contradictory speeches were the product of a single mind.

'One can but see,' he remarked, adding, 'As Ibsen says, "things happen".' He was itching to talk about books and make the most of his romantic hour. Minute after minute slipped away, while the ladies, with imperfect skill, discussed the subject of reinsurance or praised their anonymous friend. Leonard grew annoyed—perhaps rightly. He made vague remarks about not being one of those who minded their affairs being talked over by others, but they did not take the hint. Men might have shown more tact. Women, however tactful elsewhere, are heavy-handed here. They cannot see why we should shroud our incomes and our prospects in a veil. 'How much exactly have you, and how much do you expect to have next June?' And these were women with a theory, who held that reticence about money matters is absurd, and that life would be truer if each would state the exact size of the golden island upon which he stands, the exact stretch of warp over which he throws the woof that is not money. How can we do justice to the pattern otherwise?

And the precious minutes slipped away, and Jacky and squalor came nearer. At last he could bear it no longer, and broke in, reciting the names of books feverishly. There was a moment of piercing joy when Margaret said, 'So *you* like Carlyle,' and then the door opened, and 'Mr Wilcox, Miss Wilcox' entered, preceded by two prancing puppies.

'Oh, the dears! Oh, Evie, how too impossibly sweet!' screamed Helen, falling on her hands and knees.

'We brought the little fellows round,' said Mr Wilcox.

'I bred 'em myself.'

'Oh, really! Mr Bast, come and play with puppies.'

'I've got to be going now,' said Leonard sourly.

'But play with puppies a little first.'

'This is Ahab, that's Jezebel,' said Evie, who was one of those who name animals after the less successful characters of Old Testament history.

'I've got to be going.'

Helen was too much occupied with puppies to notice him.

'Mr Wilcox, Mr Ba—must you be really? Good-bye!'

'Come again,' said Helen from the floor.

Then Leonard's gorge rose. Why should he come again? What was the good of it? He said roundly: 'No, I shan't; I knew it would be a failure.'

Most people would have let him go. 'A little mistake. We tried knowing another class—impossible.' But the Schlegels had never played with life. They had attempted friendship, and they would take the consequences. Helen retorted, 'I call that a very rude remark. What do you want to turn on me like that for?' and suddenly the drawing-room re-echoed to a vulgar row.

'You ask me why I turn on you?'

'Yes.'

'What do you want to have me here for?'

'To help you, you silly boy!' cried Helen. 'And don't shout.'

'*I* don't want your patronage. *I* don't want your tea. I was quite happy. What do you want to unsettle me for?' He turned to Mr Wilcox. 'I put it to this gentleman. I ask you, sir, am I to have my brain picked?'

Mr Wilcox turned to Margaret with the air of humorous strength that he could so well command. 'Are we intruding, Miss Schlegel? Can we be of any use, or shall we go?'

But Margaret ignored him.

'I'm connected with a leading insurance company, sir. I receive what I take to be an invitation from these—ladies' (he drawled the word). 'I come, and it's to have my brain picked. I ask you, is it fair?'

'Highly unfair,' said Mr Wilcox, drawing a gasp from Evie who knew that her father was becoming dangerous.

'There, you hear that? Most unfair, the gentleman says. There! Not content with'—pointing at Margaret—'you can't deny it.' His voice rose: he was falling into the rhythm of a scene with Jacky. 'But as soon as I'm useful it's a very different thing. "Oh yes, send for him. Cross-question him. Pick his brains." Oh yes. Now, take me on the whole, I'm a quiet fellow: I'm law-abiding, I don't wish any unpleasantness; but I—I—'

'You,' said Margaret—'you—you—'

Laughter from Evie, as at a repartee.

'You are the man who tried to walk by the Pole Star.'

More laughter.

'You saw the sunrise.'

Laughter.

'You tried to get away from the fogs that are stifling us all—away past books and houses to the truth. You were looking for a real home.'

'I fail to see the connection,' said Leonard, hot with stupid anger.

'So do I.' There was a pause. 'You were that last Sunday—you are this today. Mr Bast! I and my sister have talked you over. We wanted to help you; we also supposed you might help us. We did not have you here out of charity—which bores us—but because we hoped there would be a connection between last Sunday and other days. What is the good of your stars and trees, your sunrise and the wind, if they do not enter into our daily lives? They have never entered into mine, but into yours, we thought—haven't we all to struggle against life's daily grayness, against pettiness, against mechanical cheerfulness, against suspicion? I struggle by remembering my friends; others I have known by remembering some place—some beloved place or tree—we thought you one of these.'

'Of course, if there's been any misunderstanding,' mumbled Leonard, 'all I can do is to go. But I beg to state—' He paused. Ahab and Jezebel danced at his boots and made him look ridiculous. 'You were picking my brain for official information—I can prove it—I—' He blew his nose and left them.

'Can I help you now?' said Mr Wilcox, turning to Margaret. 'May I have one quiet word with him in the hall?'

'Helen, go after him—do anything—*anything*—to make the noodle understand.'

Helen hesitated.

'But really—' said their visitor. 'Ought she to?'

At once she went.

He resumed. 'I would have chimed in, but I felt that you could polish him off for yourselves—I didn't interfere. You were splen-did, Miss Schlegel—absolutely splendid. You can take my word for it, but there are very few women who could have managed him.'

'Oh yes,' said Margaret distractedly.

'Bowling him over with those long sentences was what fetched me,' cried Evie.

'Yes, indeed,' chuckled her father; 'all that part about "mechanical cheerfulness"—oh, fine!'

'I'm very sorry,' said Margaret, collecting herself. 'He's a nice creature really. I cannot think what set him off. It has been most unpleasant for you.'

'Oh, *I* didn't mind.' Then he changed his mood. He asked if he might speak as an old friend, and, permission given, said: 'Oughtn't you really to be more careful?'

Margaret laughed, though her thoughts still strayed after Helen. 'Do you realize that it's all your fault?' she said. 'You're responsible.'

'I?'

'This is the young man whom we were to warn against the Porphyrion. We warn him, and—look!'

Mr Wilcox was annoyed. 'I hardly consider that a fair deduction,' he said.

'Obviously unfair,' said Margaret. 'I was only thinking how tangled things are. It's our fault mostly—neither yours nor his.'

'Not his?'

'No.'

'Miss Schlegel, you are too kind.'

'Yes, indeed,' nodded Evie, a little contemptuously.

'You behave much too well to people, and then they impose on you. I know the world and that type of man, and as soon as I entered the room I saw you had not been treating him properly. You must keep that type at a distance. Otherwise they forget themselves. Sad, but true. They aren't our sort, and one must face the fact.'

'Ye-es.'

'Do admit that we should never have had this outburst if he was a gentleman.'

'I admit it willingly,' said Margaret, who was pacing up and down the room. 'A gentleman would have kept his suspicions to himself.'

Mr Wilcox watched her with a vague uneasiness.

'What did he suspect you of?'

'Of wanting to make money out of him.'

'Intolerable brute! But how were you to benefit?'

'Exactly. How indeed! Just horrible, corroding suspicion. One touch of thought or of goodwill would have brushed it away. Just the senseless fear that does make men intolerable brutes.'

'I come back to my original point. You ought to be more careful, Miss Schlegel. Your servants ought to have orders not to let such people in.'

She turned to him frankly. 'Let me explain exactly why we like this man, and want to see him again.'

'That's your clever way of talking. I shall never believe you like him.'

'I do. Firstly, because he cares for physical adventure, just as you do. Yes, you go motoring and shooting; he would like to go camping out. Secondly, he cares for something special *in* adventure. It is quickest to call that special something poetry—'

'Oh, he's one of that writer sort.'

'No—oh no! I mean he may be, but it would be loathsome stuff. His brain is filled with the husks of books, culture—horrible; we want him to wash out his brain and go to the real thing. We want to show him how he may get upsides with life. As I said, either friends or the country, some'—she hesitated—'either some very dear person or some very dear place seems necessary to relieve life's daily gray, and to show that it *is* gray. If possible, one should have both.'

Some of her words ran past Mr Wilcox. He let them run past. Others he caught and criticized with admirable lucidity.

'Your mistake is this, and it is a very common mistake. This young bounder has a life of his own. What right have you to conclude it is an unsuccessful life, or, as you call it, "gray"?'

'Because—'

'One minute. You know nothing about him. He probably has his own joys and interests—wife, children, snug little home. That's where we practical fellows'—he smiled—'are more tolerant than you intellectuals. We live and let live, and assume that things are jogging on fairly well elsewhere, and that the ordinary plain man may be trusted to look after his own affairs. I quite grant—I look at the faces of the clerks in my own office, and observe them to be dull, but I don't know what's going on beneath. So, by the way, with London. I have heard you rail against London, Miss Schlegel, and it seems a funny thing to say but I was very angry with you. What do you know about London? You only see civilization from the outside. I don't say in your case, but in too many cases that attitude leads to morbidity, discontent and socialism.'

She admitted the strength of his position, though it undermined imagination. As he spoke, some outposts of poetry and perhaps of sympathy fell ruining, and she retreated to what she called her 'second line'—to the special facts of the case.

'His wife is an old bore,' she said simply. 'He never came home last Saturday night because he wanted to be alone, and she thought he was with us.'

'*With you*?'

'Yes.' Evie tittered. 'He hasn't got the cosy home that you assumed. He needs outside interests.'

'Naughty young man!' cried the girl.

'Naughty?' said Margaret, who hated naughtiness more than sin. 'When you're married, Miss Wilcox, won't you want outside interests?'

'He has apparently got them,' put in Mr Wilcox slyly.

'Yes, indeed, father.'

'He was tramping in Surrey, if you mean that,' said Margaret, pacing away rather crossly.

'Oh, I dare say!'

'Miss Wilcox, he was!'

'M-m-m-m!' from Mr Wilcox, who thought the episode amusing, if risqué. With most ladies he would not have discussed it, but he was trading on Margaret's reputation as an emancipated woman.

'He said so, and about such a thing he wouldn't lie.'

They both began to laugh.

'That's where I differ from you. Men lie about their positions and prospects, but not about a thing of that sort.'

He shook his head. 'Miss Schlegel, excuse me, but I know the type.'

'I said before—he isn't a type. He cares about adventures rightly. He's certain that our smug existence isn't all. He's vulgar and hysterical and bookish, but don't think that sums him up. There's manhood in him as well. Yes, that's what I'm trying to say. He's a real man.'

As she spoke their eyes met, and it was as if Mr Wilcox's defences fell. She saw back to the real man in him. Unwittingly she had touched his emotions. A woman and two men—they had formed the magic triangle of sex, and the male was thrilled to jealousy, in case the female was attracted by another male. Love, say the ascetics,

reveals our shameful kinship with the beasts. Be it so; one can bear that; jealousy is the real shame. It is jealousy, not love, that connects us with the farmyard intolerably, and calls up visions of two angry cocks and a complacent hen. Margaret crushed complacency down because she was civilized. Mr Wilcox, uncivilized, continued to feel anger long after he had rebuilt his defences, and was again presenting a bastion to the world.

'Miss Schlegel, you're a pair of dear creatures, but you really *must* be careful in this uncharitable world. What does your brother say?'

'I forget.'

'Surely he has some opinion?'

'He laughs, if I remember correctly.'

'He's very clever, isn't he?' said Evie, who had met and detested Tibby at Oxford.

'Yes, pretty well—but I wonder what Helen's doing.'

'She is very young to undertake this sort of thing,' said Mr Wilcox.

Margaret went out into the landing. She heard no sound, and Mr Bast's topper was missing from the hall.

'Helen!' she called.

'Yes!' replied a voice from the library.

'You in there?'

'Yes—he's gone some time.'

Margaret went to her. 'Why, you're all alone,' she said.

'Yes—it's all right, Meg. Poor, poor creature—'

'Come back to the Wilcoxes and tell me later—Mr W. much concerned, and slightly titillated.'

'Oh, I've no patience with him. I hate him. Poor dear Mr Bast! He wanted to talk literature, and we would talk business. Such a muddle of a man, and yet so worth pulling through. I like him extraordinarily.'

'Well done,' said Margaret, kissing her, 'but come into the drawing-room now, and don't talk about him to the Wilcoxes. Make light of the whole thing.'

Helen came and behaved with a cheerfulness that reassured their visitor—this hen at all events was fancy-free.

'He's gone with my blessing,' she cried, 'and now for puppies.'

As they drove away, Mr Wilcox said to his daughter:

'I am really concerned at the way those girls go on. They are as clever as you make 'em, but unpractical—God bless me! One of these days they'll go too far. Girls like that oughtn't to live alone in London. Until they marry, they ought to have someone to look after them. We must look in more often—we're better than no one. You like them, don't you, Evie?'

Evie replied: 'Helen's right enough, but I can't stand the toothy one. And I shouldn't have called either of them girls.'

Evie had grown up handsome. Dark-eyed, with the glow of youth under sunburn, built firmly and firm-lipped, she was the best the Wilcoxes could do in the way of feminine beauty. For the present, puppies and her father were the only things she loved, but the net of matrimony was being prepared for her, and a few days later she was attracted to a Mr Percy Cahill, an uncle of Mrs Charles's, and he was attracted to her.

XVII

THE AGE OF PROPERTY holds bitter moments even for a proprietor. When a move is imminent, furniture becomes ridiculous, and Margaret now lay awake at nights wondering where, where on earth they and all their belongings would be deposited in September next. Chairs, tables, pictures, books, that had rumbled down to them through the generations, must rumble forward again like a slide of rubbish to which she longed to give the final push, and send it toppling into the sea. But there were all their father's books—they never read them, but they were their father's, and must be kept. There was the marble-topped chiffonier—their mother had set store by it, they could not remember why. Round every knob and cushion in the house sentiment gathered, a sentiment that was at times personal, but more often a faint piety to the dead, a prolongation of rites that might have ended at the grave.

It was absurd, if you came to think of it; Helen and Tibby came to think of it; Margaret was too busy with the house-agents. The feudal ownership of land did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty. The Schlegels were certainly the poorer for the loss of Wickham Place. It had helped to balance their lives, and almost to counsel them. Nor is their ground-landlord spiritually the richer. He has built flats on its site, his motor-cars grow swifter, his exposures of socialism more trenchant. But he has spilt the precious distillation of the years, and no chemistry of his can give it back to society again.

Margaret grew depressed; she was anxious to settle on a house before they left town to pay their annual visit to Mrs Munt. She enjoyed this visit, and wanted to have her mind at ease for it. Swanage, though dull, was stable, and this year she longed more than usual for its fresh air and for the magnificent downs that guard it on the north.

But London thwarted her; in its atmosphere she could not concentrate. London only stimulates, it cannot sustain; and Margaret, hurrying over its surface for a house without knowing what sort of a house she wanted, was paying for many a thrilling sensation in the past. She could not even break loose from culture, and her time was wasted by concerts which it would be a sin to miss, and invitations which it would never do to refuse. At last she grew desperate; she resolved that she would go nowhere and be at home to no one until she found a house, and broke the resolution in half an hour.

Once she had humorously lamented that she had never been to Simpson's restaurant in the Strand. Now a note arrived from Miss Wilcox, asking her to lunch there. Mr Cahill was coming, and the three would have such a jolly chat, and perhaps end up at the Hippodrome.[1] Margaret had no strong regard for Evie, and no desire to meet her fiancé, and she was surprised that Helen, who had been far funnier about Simpson's, had not been asked instead. But the invitation touched her by its intimate tone. She must know Evie Wilcox better than she supposed, and declaring that she 'simply must' she accepted.

But when she saw Evie at the entrance of the restaurant, staring fiercely at nothing after the fashion of athletic women, her heart failed her. Miss Wilcox had changed perceptibly since her engagement. Her voice was gruffer, her manner more downright, and she was inclined to patronize the more foolish virgin. Margaret was silly enough to be pained at this. Depressed at her isolation, she saw not only houses and furniture but the vessel of life itself slipping past her, with people like Evie and Mr Cahill on board.

There are moments when virtue and wisdom fail us, and one of them came to her at Simpson's in the Strand. As she trod the staircase, narrow, but carpeted thickly, as she entered the eating-room, where saddles of mutton were being trundled up to expectant clergymen, she had a strong, if erroneous, conviction of her own futility, and wished she had never come out of her backwater, where nothing happened except art and literature, and where no one ever got married or succeeded in remaining engaged. Then came a little surprise. Father might be of the party —yes, father was. With a smile of pleasure she moved forward to greet him, and her feeling of loneliness vanished.

'I thought I'd get round if I could,' said he. 'Evie told me of her little plan, so I just slipped in and secured a table. Always secure a table first. Evie, don't pretend you want to sit by your old father, because you don't. Miss Schlegel, come in my side, out of pity. My goodness, but you look tired! Been worrying round after your young clerks?'

'No, after houses,' said Margaret, edging past him into the box. 'I'm hungry, not tired; I want to eat heaps.'

'That's good. What'll you have?'

'Fish pie,' said she, with a glance at the menu.

'Fish pie! Fancy coming for fish pie to Simpson's. It's not a bit the thing to go for here.'

'Go for something for me, then,' said Margaret, pulling off her gloves. Her spirits were rising, and his reference to Leonard Bast had warmed her curiously.

'Saddle of mutton,' said he after profound reflection; 'and cider to drink. That's the type of thing. I like this place, for a joke, once in a way. It is so thoroughly Old English. Don't you agree?'

'Yes,' said Margaret, who didn't. The order was given, the joint rolled up, and the carver, under Mr Wilcox's direction, cut the meat where it was succulent, and piled their plates high. Mr Cahill insisted on sirloin, but admitted that he had made a mistake later on. He and Evie soon fell into a conversation of the 'No, I didn't; yes, you did' type—conversation which, though fascinating to those who are engaged in it, neither desires nor deserves the attention of others.

'It's a golden rule to tip the carver. Tip everywhere's my motto.'

'Perhaps it does make life more human.'

'Then the fellows know one again. Especially in the East, if you tip, they remember you from year's end to year's end.'

'Have you been in the East?'

'Oh, Greece and the Levant. I used to go out for sport and business to Cyprus; some military society of a sort there. A few piastres, properly distributed, help to keep one's memory green. But you, of course, think this shockingly cynical. How's your discussion society getting on? Any new utopias lately?'

'No, I'm house-hunting, Mr Wilcox, as I've already told you once. Do you know of any houses?'

'Afraid I don't.'

'Well, what's the point of being practical if you can't find two distressed females a house? We merely want a small house with large rooms, and plenty of them.'

'Evie, I like that! Miss Schlegel expects me to turn house-agent for her!'

'What's that, father?'

'I want a new home in September, and someone must find it. I can't.'

'Percy, do you know of anything?'

'I can't say I do,' said Mr Cahill.

'How like you! You're never any good.'

'Never any good. Just listen to her! Never any good. Oh, come!'

'Well, you aren't. Miss Schlegel, is he?'

The torrent of their love, having splashed these drops at Margaret, swept away on its habitual course. She sympathized with it now, for a little comfort had restored her geniality. Speech and silence pleased her equally, and while Mr Wilcox made some preliminary inquiries about cheese her eyes surveyed the restaurant, and admired

its well-calculated tributes to the solidity of our past. Though no more Old English than the works of Kipling, it had selected its reminiscences so adroitly that her criticism was lulled, and the guests whom it was nourishing for imperial purposes bore the outer semblance of Parson Adams or Tom Jones.[2] Scraps of their talk jarred oddly on the ear. 'Right you are! I'll cable out to Uganda this evening,' came from the table behind. 'Their Emperor wants war; well, let him have it,' was the opinion of a clergyman. She smiled at such incongruities. 'Next time,' she said to Mr Wilcox, 'you shall come to lunch with me at Mr Eustace Miles's.'[3]

'With pleasure.'

'No, you'd hate it,' she said, pushing her glass towards him for some more cider. 'It's all proteids and body-buildings, and people come up to you and beg your pardon, but you have such a beautiful aura.'

'A what?'

'Never heard of an aura? Oh, happy, happy man! I scrub at mine for hours. Nor of an astral plane?'

He had heard of astral planes, and censured them.

'Just so. Luckily it was Helen's aura, not mine, and she had to chaperon it and do the politenesses. I just sat with my handkerchief in my mouth till the man went.'

'Funny experiences seem to come to you two girls. No one's ever asked me about my—what d'ye call it? Perhaps I've not got one.'

'You're bound to have one, but it may be such a terrible colour that no one dares mention it.'

'Tell me, though, Miss Schlegel, do you really believe in the supernatural and all that?'

'Too difficult a question.'

'Why's that? Gruyère or Stilton?'

'Gruyère, please.'

'Better have Stilton.'

'Stilton. Because, though I don't believe in auras, and think Theosophy's only a halfway-house—'

'—Yet there may be something in it all the same,' he concluded, with a frown.

'Not even that. I may be halfway in the wrong direction. I can't explain. I don't believe in all these fads, and yet I don't like saying that I don't believe in them.'

He seemed unsatisfied, and said: 'So you couldn't give me your word that you *don't* hold with astral bodies and all the rest of it?'

'I could,' said Margaret, surprised that the point was of any importance to him. 'Indeed, I will. When I talked about scrubbing my aura, I was only trying to be funny. But why do you want this settled?'

'I don't know.'

'Now, Mr Wilcox, you do know.'

'Yes, I am'—'No, you're not' burst from the lovers opposite. Margaret was silent for a moment, and then changed the subject.

'How's your house?'

'Much the same as when you honoured it last week.'

'I don't mean Ducie Street. Howards End, of course.'

'Why "of course"?'

'Can't you turn out your tenant and let it to us? We're nearly demented.'

'Let me think. I wish I could help you. But I thought you wanted to be in town. One bit of advice: fix your district, then fix your price, and then don't budge. That's how I got both Ducie Street and Oniton. I said to myself, "I mean to be exactly here," and I was, and Oniton's a place in a thousand.'

'But I do budge. Gentlemen seem to mesmerize houses—cow them with an eye, and up they come, trembling. Ladies can't. It's the houses that are mesmerizing me, I've no control over the saucy things. Houses are alive. No?'

'I'm out of my depth,' he said, and added: 'Didn't you talk rather like that to your office-boy?'

'Did I?—I mean I did, more or less. I talk the same way to everyone—or try to.'

'Yes, I know. And how much do you suppose that he understood of it?'

'That's his lookout. I don't believe in suiting my conversation to my company. One can doubtless hit upon some medium of exchange that seems to do well enough, but it's no more like the real thing than money is like food. There's no nourishment in it. You pass it to the lower classes, and they pass it back to you, and this you call "social intercourse" or "mutual endeavour", when it's mutual priggishness if it's anything. Our friends at Chelsea don't see this. They say one ought to be at all costs intelligible, and sacrifice—'

'Lower classes,' interrupted Mr Wilcox, as it were thrusting his hand into her speech. 'Well, you do admit that there are rich and poor. That's something.'

Margaret could not reply. Was he incredibly stupid, or did he understand her better than she understood herself?

'You do admit that, if wealth was divided up equally, in a few years there would be rich and poor again just the same. The hardworking man would come to the top, the wastrel sink to the bottom.'

'Everyone admits that.'

'Your socialists don't.'

'My socialists do. Yours mayn't; but I strongly suspect yours of being not socialists, but ninepins, which you have constructed for your own amusement. I can't imagine any living creature who would bowl over quite so easily.'

He would have resented this had she not been a woman. But women may say anything—it was one of his holiest beliefs—and he only retorted, with a gay smile: 'I don't care. You've made two damaging admissions, and I'm

heartily with you in both.'

In time they finished lunch, and Margaret, who had excused herself from the Hippodrome, took her leave. Evie had scarcely addressed her, and she suspected that the entertainment had been planned by the father. He and she were advancing out of their respective families towards a more intimate acquaintance. It had begun long ago. She had been his wife's friend, and, as such, he had given her that silver vinaigrette as a memento. It was pretty of him to have given that vinaigrette, and he had always preferred her to Helen—unlike most men. But the advance had been astonishing lately. They had done more in a week than in two years, and were really beginning to know each other.

She did not forget his promise to sample Eustace Miles, and asked him as soon as she could secure Tibby as his chaperon. He came, and partook of body-building dishes with humility.

Next morning the Schlegels left for Swanage. They had not succeeded in finding a new home.

XVIII

As they were seated at Aunt Juley's breakfast-table at The Bays, parrying her excessive hospitality and enjoying the view of the bay, a letter came for Margaret and threw her into perturbation. It was from Mr Wilcox. It announced an 'important change' in his plans. Owing to Evie's marriage, he had decided to give up his house in Ducie Street, and was willing to let it on a yearly tenancy. It was a businesslike letter, and stated frankly what he would do for them and what he would not do. Also the rent. If they approved, Margaret was to come up *at once*—the words were underlined, as is necessary when dealing with women—and to go over the house with him. If they disapproved, a wire would oblige, as he should put it into the hands of an agent.

The letter perturbed, because she was not sure what it meant. If he liked her, if he had manoeuvred to get her to Simpson's, might this be a manoeuvre to get her to London, and result in an offer of marriage? She put it to herself as indelicately as possible, in the hope that her brain would cry, 'Rubbish, you're a self-conscious fool!' But her brain only tingled a little and was silent, and for a time she sat gazing at the mincing waves, and wondering whether the news would seem strange to the others.

As soon as she began speaking, the sound of her own voice reassured her. There could be nothing in it. The replies also were typical, and in the buzz of conversation her fears vanished.

'You needn't go, though—' began her hostess.

'I needn't, but hadn't I better? It's really getting rather serious. We let chance after chance slip, and the end of it is we shall be bundled out bag and baggage into the street. We don't know what we *want*, that's the mischief with us—'

'No, we have no real ties,' said Helen, helping herself to toast.

'Shan't I go up to town today, take the house if it's the least possible, and then come down by the afternoon train tomorrow, and start enjoying myself. I shall be no fun to myself or to others until this business is off my mind.'

'But you won't do anything rash, Margaret?'

'There's nothing rash to do.'

'Who *are* the Wilcoxes?' said Tibby, a question that sounds silly, but was really extremely subtle, as his aunt found to her cost when she tried to answer it. 'I don't *manage* the Wilcoxes; I don't see where they come *in*.'

'No more do I,' agreed Helen. 'It's funny that we just don't lose sight of them. Out of all our hotel acquaintances, Mr Wilcox is the only one who has stuck. It is now over three years, and we have drifted away from far more interesting people in that time.'

'Interesting people don't get one houses.'

'Meg, if you start in your honest-English vein, I shall throw the treacle at you.'

'It's a better vein than the cosmopolitan,' said Margaret, getting up. 'Now, children, which is it to be? You know the Ducie Street house. Shall I say yes or shall I say no? Tibby love—which? I'm specially anxious to pin you both.'

'It all depends what meaning you attach to the word "possi—"'

'It depends on nothing of the sort. Say yes.'

'Say no.'

Then Margaret spoke rather seriously. 'I think,' she said, 'that our race is degenerating. We cannot settle even this little thing; what will it be like when we have to settle a big one?'

'It will be as easy as eating,' returned Helen.

'I was thinking of father. How could he settle to leave Germany as he did, when he had fought for it as a young man, and all his feelings and friends were Prussian? How could he break loose with patriotism and begin aiming at something else? It would have killed me. When he was nearly forty he could change countries and ideals—and we, at our age, can't change houses. It's humiliating.'

'Your father may have been able to change countries,' said Mrs Munt with asperity, 'and that may or may not be a good thing. But he could change houses no better than you can, in fact, much worse. Never shall I forget what

poor Emily suffered in the move from Manchester.'

'I knew it,' cried Helen. 'I told you so. It is the little things one bungles at. The big, real ones are nothing when they come.'

'Bungle, my dear! You are too little to recollect—in fact, you weren't there. But the furniture was actually in the vans and on the move before the lease for Wickham Place was signed, and Emily took train with baby—who was Margaret then—and the smaller luggage for London, without so much as knowing where her new home would be. Getting away from that house may be hard, but it is nothing to the misery that we all went through getting you into it.'

Helen, with her mouth full, cried:

'And that's the man who beat the Austrians, and the Danes, and the French, and who beat the Germans that were inside himself. And we're like him.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Tibby. 'Remember that I am cosmopolitan, please.'

'Helen may be right.'

'Of course she's right,' said Helen.

Helen might be right, but she did not go up to London. Margaret did that. An interrupted holiday is the worst of the minor worries, and one may be pardoned for feeling morbid when a business letter snatches one away from the sea and friends. She could not believe that her father had ever felt the same. Her eyes had been troubling her lately, so that she could not read in the train, and it bored her to look at the landscape, which she had seen but yesterday. At Southampton she 'waved' to Frieda; Frieda was on her way down to join them at Swanage, and Mrs Munt had calculated that their trains would cross. But Frieda was looking the other way, and Margaret travelled on to town feeling solitary and old-maidish. How like an old maid to fancy that Mr Wilcox was courting her! She had once visited a spinster—poor, silly and unattractive—whose mania it was that every man who approached her fell in love. How Margaret's heart had bled for the deluded thing! How she had lectured, reasoned, and in despair acquiesced! 'I may have been deceived by the curate, my dear, but the young fellow who brings the midday post really is fond of me, and has, as a matter of fact—' It had always seemed to her the most hideous corner of old age, yet she might be driven into it herself by the mere pressure of virginity.

Mr Wilcox met her at Waterloo himself. She felt certain that he was not the same as usual; for one thing, he took offence at everything she said.

'This is awfully kind of you,' she began, 'but I'm afraid it's not going to do. The house has not been built that suits the Schlegel family.'

'What! Have you come up determined not to deal?'

'Not exactly.'

'Not exactly? In that case let's be starting.'

She lingered to admire the motor, which was new, and a fairer creature than the vermilion giant that had borne Aunt Juley to her doom three years before.

'Presumably it's very beautiful,' she said. 'How do you like it, Crane?'

'Come, let's be starting,' repeated her host. 'How on earth did you know that my chauffeur was called Crane?'

'Why, I know Crane: I've been for a drive with Evie once. I know that you've got a parlourmaid called Milton. I know all sorts of things.'

'Evie!' he echoed in injured tones. 'You won't see her. She's gone out with Cahill. It's no fun, I can tell you, being left so much alone. I've got my work all day—indeed, a great deal too much of it—but when I come home in the evening, I tell you, I can't stand the house.'

'In my absurd way, I'm lonely too,' Margaret replied. 'It's heartbreaking to leave one's old home. I scarcely remember anything before Wickham Place, and Helen and Tibby were born there. Helen says—'

'You, too, feel lonely?'

'Horribly. Hullo, Parliament's back!'

Mr Wilcox glanced at Parliament contemptuously. The more important ropes of life lay elsewhere. 'Yes, they are talking again,' said he. 'But you were going to say—'

'Only some rubbish about furniture. Helen says it alone endures while men and houses perish, and that in the end the world will be a desert of chairs and sofas—just imagine it!—rolling through infinity with no one to sit upon them.'

'Your sister always likes her little joke.'

'She says yes, my brother says no, to Ducie Street. It's no fun helping us, Mr Wilcox, I assure you.'

'You are not as unpractical as you pretend. I shall never believe it.'

Margaret laughed. But she was—quite as unpractical. She could not concentrate on details. Parliament, the Thames, the irresponsive chauffeur, would flash into the field of house-hunting, and all demand some comment or response. It is impossible to see modern life steadily and see it whole, and she had chosen to see it whole. Mr Wilcox saw steadily. He never bothered over the mysterious or the private. The Thames might run inland from the sea, the chauffeur might conceal all passion and philosophy beneath his unhealthy skin. They knew their own business, and he knew his.

Yet she liked being with him. He was not a rebuke, but a stimulus, and banished morbidity. Some twenty years her senior, he preserved a gift that she supposed herself to have already lost—not youth's creative power, but its self-confidence and optimism. He was so sure that it was a very pleasant world. His complexion was robust, his

hair had receded but not thinned, the thick moustache and the eyes that Helen had compared to brandy-balls had an agreeable menace in them, whether they were turned towards the slums or towards the stars. Some day—in the millennium—there may be no need for his type. At present, homage is due to it from those who think themselves superior, and who possibly are.

'At all events you responded to my telegram promptly,' he remarked.

'Oh, even I know a good thing when I see it.'

'I'm glad you don't despise the goods of this world.'

'Heavens, no! Only idiots and prigs do that.'

'I am glad, very glad,' he repeated, suddenly softening and turning to her, as if the remark had pleased him. 'There is so much cant talked in would-be intellectual circles. I am glad you don't share it. Self-denial is all very well as a means of strengthening the character. But I can't stand those people who run down comforts. They have usually some axe to grind. Can you?'

'Comforts are of two kinds,' said Margaret, who was keeping herself in hand—'those we can share with others, like fire, weather, or music; and those we can't—food, for instance. It depends.'

'I mean reasonable comforts, of course. I shouldn't like to think that you—' He bent nearer; the sentence died unfinished. Margaret's head turned very stupid, and the inside of it seemed to revolve like the beacon in a lighthouse. He did not kiss her, for the hour was half past twelve, and the car was passing by the stables of Buckingham Palace. But the atmosphere was so charged with emotion that people only seemed to exist on her account, and she was surprised that Crane did not realize this, and turn round. Idiot though she might be, surely Mr Wilcox was more—how should one put it?—more psychological than usual. Always a good judge of character for business purposes, he seemed this afternoon to enlarge his field, and to note qualities outside neatness, obedience and decision.

'I want to go over the whole house,' she announced when they arrived. 'As soon as I get back to Swanage, which will be tomorrow afternoon, I'll talk it over once more with Helen and Tibby, and wire you yes or no.'

'Right. The dining-room.' And they began their survey.

The dining-room was big, but overfurnished. Chelsea would have moaned aloud. Mr Wilcox had eschewed those decorative schemes that wince, and relent, and refrain, and achieve beauty by sacrificing comfort and pluck. After so much self-colour and self-denial, Margaret viewed with relief the sumptuous dado, the frieze, the gilded wallpaper, amid whose foliage parrots sang. It would never do with her own furniture, but those heavy chairs, that immense sideboard loaded with presentation plate; stood up against its pressure like men. The room suggested men, and Margaret, keen to derive the modern capitalist from the warriors and hunters of the past, saw it as an ancient guest-hall, where the lord sat at meat among his thanes. Even the Bible—the Dutch Bible that Charles had brought back from the Boer War—fell into position. Such a room admitted loot.

'Now the entrance hall.'

The entrance hall was paved.

'Here we fellows smoke.'

We fellows smoked in chairs of maroon leather. It was as if a motor-car had spawned. 'Oh, jolly!' said Margaret, sinking into one of them.

'You do like it?' he said, fixing his eyes on her upturned face, and surely betraying an almost intimate note. 'It's all rubbish not making oneself comfortable. Isn't it?'

'Ye-es. Semi-rubbish. Are those Cruikshanks?'

'Gillrays.[1] Shall we go on upstairs?'

'Does all this furniture come from Howards End?'

'The Howards End furniture has all gone to Oniton.'

'Does—however, I'm concerned with the house, not the furniture. How big is this smoking-room?'

'Thirty by fifteen. No, wait a minute. Fifteen and a half.'

'Ah, well. Mr Wilcox, aren't you ever amused at the solemnity with which we middle classes approach the subject of houses?'

They proceeded to the drawing-room. Chelsea managed better here. It was sallow and ineffective. One could visualize the ladies withdrawing to it, while their lords discussed life's realities below, to the accompaniment of cigars. Had Mrs Wilcox's drawing-room looked thus at Howards End? Just as this thought entered Margaret's brain, Mr Wilcox did ask her to be his wife, and the knowledge that she had been right so overcame her that she nearly fainted.

But the proposal was not to rank among the world's great love scenes.

'Miss Schlegel'—his voice was firm—'I have had you up on false pretences. I want to speak about a much more serious matter than a house.'

Margaret almost answered: 'I know—'

'Could you be induced to share my—is it probable—'

'Oh, Mr Wilcox!' she interrupted, holding the piano and averting her eyes. 'I see, I see. I will write to you afterwards if I may.'

He began to stammer. 'Miss Schlegel—Margaret—you don't understand.'

'Oh yes! Indeed, yes!' said Margaret.

'I am asking you to be my wife.'

So deep already was her sympathy, that when he said, ‘I am asking you to be my wife,’ she made herself give a little start. She must show surprise if he expected it. An immense joy came over her. It was indescribable. It had nothing to do with humanity, and most resembled the all-pervading happiness of fine weather. Fine weather is due to the sun, but Margaret could think of no central radiance here. She stood in his drawing-room happy, and longing to give happiness. On leaving him she realized that the central radiance had been love.

‘You aren’t offended, Miss Schlegel?’

‘How could I be offended?’

There was a moment’s pause. He was anxious to get rid of her, and she knew it. She had too much intuition to look at him as he struggled for possessions that money cannot buy. He desired comradeship and affection, but he feared them, and she, who had taught herself only to desire, and could have clothed the struggle with beauty, held back, and hesitated with him.

‘Good-bye,’ she continued. ‘You will have a letter from me—I am going back to Swanage tomorrow.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Good-bye, and it’s you I thank.’

‘I may order the motor round, mayn’t I?’

‘That would be most kind.’

‘I wish I had written instead. Ought I to have written?’

‘Not at all.’

‘There’s just one question—’

She shook her head. He looked a little bewildered, and they parted.

They parted without shaking hands; she had kept the interview, for his sake, in tints of the quietest gray. Yet she thrilled with happiness ere she reached her own house. Others had loved her in the past, if one may apply to their brief desires so grave a word, but those others had been ‘ninnies’—young men who had nothing to do, old men who could find nobody better. And she had often ‘loved’, too, but only so far as the facts of sex demanded; mere yearnings for the masculine, to be dismissed for what they were worth, with a smile. Never before had her personality been touched. She was not young or very rich, and it amazed her that a man of any standing should take her seriously. As she sat trying to do accounts in her empty house, amidst beautiful pictures and noble books, waves of emotion broke, as if a tide of passion was flowing through the night air. She shook her head, tried to concentrate her attention, and failed. In vain did she repeat: ‘But I’ve been through this sort of thing before.’ She had never been through it; the big machinery, as opposed to the little, had been set in motion, and the idea that Mr Wilcox loved obsessed her before she came to love him in return.

She would come to no decision yet. ‘Oh, sir, this is so sudden’—that prudish phrase exactly expressed her when her time came. Premonitions are not preparation. She must examine more closely her own nature and his; she must talk it over judicially with Helen. It had been a strange love scene—the central radiance unacknowledged from first to last. She, in his place, would have said, ‘Ich liebe dich,’ but perhaps it was not his habit to open the heart. He might have done it if she had pressed him—as a matter of duty, perhaps; England expects every man to open his heart once; but the effort would have jarred him, and never, if she could avoid it, should he lose those defences that he had chosen to raise against the world. He must never be bothered with emotional talk, or with a display of sympathy. He was an elderly man now, and it would be futile and impudent to correct him.

Mrs Wilcox strayed in and out, ever a welcome ghost; surveying the scene, thought Margaret, without one hint of bitterness.

XIX

If one wanted to show a foreigner England, perhaps the wisest course would be to take him to the final section of the Purbeck hills,[1] and stand him on their summit, a few miles to the east of Corfe. Then system after system of our island would roll together under his feet. Beneath him is the valley of the Frome, and all the wild lands that come tossing down from Dorchester, black and gold, to mirror their gorse in the expanses of Poole. The valley of the Stour is beyond, unaccountable stream, dirty at Blandford, pure at Wimborne—the Stour, sliding out of fat fields, to marry the Avon beneath the tower of Christchurch. The valley of the Avon—invisible, but far to the north the trained eye may see Clearbury Ring that guards it, and the imagination may leap beyond that onto Salisbury Plain itself, and beyond the Plain to all the glorious downs of central England. Nor is suburbia absent. Bournemouth’s ignoble coast cowers to the right, heralding the pine trees that mean, for all their beauty, red houses, and the Stock Exchange, and extend to the gates of London itself. So tremendous is the City’s trail! But the cliffs of Freshwater it shall never touch, and the island will guard the Island’s purity till the end of time. Seen from the west, the Wight is beautiful beyond all laws of beauty. It is as if a fragment of England floated forward to greet the foreigner—chalk of our chalk, turf of our turf, epitome of what will follow. And behind the fragment lie Southampton, hostess to the nations, and Portsmouth, a latent fire, and all around it, with double and treble collision of tides, swirls the sea. How many villages appear in this view! How many castles! How many churches,

vanquished or triumphant! How many ships, railways and roads! What incredible variety of men working beneath that lucent sky to what final end! The reason fails, like a wave on the Swanage beach; the imagination swells, spreads and deepens, until it becomes geographic and encircles England.

So Frieda Mosebach, now Frau Architect Liesecke, and mother to her husband's baby, was brought up to these heights to be impressed, and, after a prolonged gaze, she said that the hills were more swelling here than in Pomerania, which was true, but did not seem to Mrs Munt apposite. Poole harbour was dry, which led her to praise the absence of muddy foreshore at Friedrich Wilhelms Bad, Rügen, where beech trees hang over the tideless Baltic, and cows may contemplate the brine. Rather unhealthy Mrs Munt thought this would be, water being safer when it moved about.

'And your English lakes—Vindermere, Grasmere—are they then unhealthy?'

'No, Frau Liesecke; but that is because they are fresh water, and different. Salt water ought to have tides, and go up and down a great deal, or else it smells. Look, for instance, at an aquarium.'

'An aquarium! Oh, *Meesis* Munt, you mean to tell me that fresh aquariums stink less than salt? Why, when Victor, my brother-in-law, collected many tadpoles—'

'You are not to say "stink",' interrupted Helen; 'at least, you may say it, but you must pretend you are being funny while you say it.'

'Then "smell". And the mud of your Pool down there—does it not smell, or may I say "stink, ha, ha"?'

'There always has been mud in Poole harbour,' said Mrs Munt, with a slight frown. 'The rivers bring it down, and a most valuable oyster fishery depends upon it.'

'Yes, that is so,' conceded Frieda; and another international incident was closed.

"'Bournemouth is,"' resumed their hostess, quoting a local rhyme to which she was much attached —"'Bournemouth is, Poole was, and Swanage is to be, the most important town of all and biggest of the three." Now, Frau Liesecke, I have shown you Bournemouth, and I have shown you Poole, so let us walk backward a little, and look down again at Swanage.'

'Aunt Juley, wouldn't that be Meg's train?'

A tiny puff of smoke had been circuiting the harbour, and now was bearing southwards towards them over the black and the gold.

'Oh, dearest Margaret, I do hope she won't be overtired.'

'Oh, I do wonder—I do wonder whether she's taken the house.'

'I hope she hasn't been hasty.'

'So do I—oh, *so* do I.'

'Will it be as beautiful as Wickham Place?' Frieda asked.

'I should think it would. Trust Mr Wilcox for doing himself proud. All those Ducie Street houses are beautiful in their modern way, and I can't think why he doesn't keep on with it. But it's really for Evie that he went there, and now that Evie's going to be married—'

'Ah!'

'You've never seen Miss Wilcox, Frieda. How absurdly matrimonial you are!'

'But sister to that Paul?'

'Yes.'

'And to that Charles,' said Mrs Munt with feeling. 'Oh, Helen, Helen, what a time that was!'

Helen laughed. 'Meg and I haven't got such tender hearts. If there's a chance of a cheap house, we go for it.'

'Now look, Frau Liesecke, at my niece's train. You see, it is coming towards us—coming, coming; and, when it gets to Corfe, it will actually go *through* the downs on which we are standing, so that, if we walk over, as I suggested, and look down on Swanage, we shall see it coming on the other side. Shall we?'

Frieda assented, and in a few minutes they had crossed the ridge and exchanged the greater view for the lesser. Rather a dull valley lay below, backed by the slope of the coastward downs. They were looking across the Isle of Purbeck and on to Swanage, soon to be the most important town of all, and ugliest of the three. Margaret's train reappeared as promised, and was greeted with approval by her aunt. It came to a standstill in the middle distance, and there it had been planned that Tibby should meet her, and drive her, and a tea-basket, up to join them.

'You see,' continued Helen to her cousin, 'the Wilcoxes collect houses as your Victor collects tadpoles. They have, one, Ducie Street; two, Howards End, where my great rumpus was; three, a country seat in Shropshire; four, Charles has a house in Hilton; and five, another near Epsom; and six, Evie will have a house when she marries, and probably a pied-à-terre in the country—which makes seven. Oh yes, and Paul a hut in Africa makes eight. I wish we could get Howards End. That was something like a dear little house! Didn't you think so, Aunt Juley?'

'I had too much to do, dear, to look at it,' said Mrs Munt, with a gracious dignity. 'I had everything to settle and explain, and Charles Wilcox to keep in his place besides. It isn't likely I should remember much. I just remember having lunch in your bedroom.'

'Yes, so do I. But, oh dear, dear, how dead it all seems! And in the autumn there began that anti-Pauline movement—you, and Frieda, and Meg, and Mrs Wilcox, all obsessed with the idea that I might yet marry Paul.'

'You yet may,' said Frieda despondently.

Helen shook her head. 'The Great Wilcox Peril will never return. If I'm certain of anything it's of that.'

'One is certain of nothing but the truth of one's own emotions.'[2]

The remark fell damply on the conversation. But Helen slipped her arm round her cousin, somehow liking her

the better for making it. It was not an original remark, nor had Frieda appropriated it passionately, for she had a patriotic rather than a philosophic mind. Yet it betrayed that interest in the universal which the average Teuton possesses and the average Englishman does not. It was, however illogically, the good, the beautiful, the true, as opposed to the respectable, the pretty, the adequate. It was a landscape of Böcklin's beside a landscape of Leader's, strident and ill-considered, but quivering into supernatural life. It sharpened idealism, stirred the soul. It may have been a bad preparation for what followed.

'Look!' cried Aunt Juley, hurrying away from generalities over the narrow summit of the down. 'Stand where I stand, and you will see the pony-cart coming. I see the pony-cart coming.'

They stood and saw the pony-cart coming. Margaret and Tibby were presently seen coming in it. Leaving the outskirts of Swanage, it drove for a little through the budding lanes, and then began the ascent.

'Have you got the house?' they shouted, long before she could possibly hear.

Helen ran down to meet her. The highroad passed over a saddle, and a track went thence at right angles along the ridge of the down.

'Have you got the house?'

Margaret shook her head.

'Oh, what a nuisance! So we're as we were?'

'Not exactly.'

She got out, looking tired.

'Some mystery,' said Tibby. 'We are to be enlightened presently.'

Margaret came close up to her and whispered that she had had a proposal of marriage from Mr Wilcox.

Helen was amused. She opened the gate onto the down so that her brother might lead the pony through. 'It's just like a widower,' she remarked. 'They've cheek enough for anything, and invariably select one of their first wife's friends.'

Margaret's face flashed despair.

'That type—' She broke off with a cry. 'Meg, not anything wrong with you?'

'Wait one minute,' said Margaret, whispering always.

'But you've never conceivably—you've never—' She pulled herself together. 'Tibby, hurry up through; I can't hold this gate indefinitely. Aunt Juley! I say, Aunt Juley, make the tea, will you, and Frieda; we've got to talk houses, and'll come on afterwards.' And then, turning her face to her sister's, she burst into tears.

Margaret was stupefied. She heard herself saying, 'Oh, really—' She felt herself touched with a hand that trembled.

'Don't,' sobbed Helen, 'don't, don't, Meg, don't!' She seemed incapable of saying any other word. Margaret, trembling herself, led her forward up the road, till they strayed through another gate onto the down.

'Don't, don't do such a thing! I tell you not to—don't! I know—don't!'

'What do you know?'

'Panic and emptiness,' sobbed Helen. 'Don't!'

Then Margaret thought: 'Helen is a little selfish. I have never behaved like this when there has seemed a chance of *her* marrying.' She said: 'But we would still see each other very often, and you—'

'It's not a thing like that,' sobbed Helen. And she broke right away and wandered distractedly upwards, stretching her hands towards the view and crying.

'What's happened to you?' called Margaret, following through the wind that gathers at sundown on the northern slopes of hills. 'But it's stupid!' And suddenly stupidity seized her, and the immense landscape was blurred. But Helen turned back.

'Meg—'

'I don't know what's happened to either of us,' said Margaret, wiping her eyes. 'We must both have gone mad.' Then Helen wiped hers, and they even laughed a little.

'Look here, sit down.'

'All right; I'll sit down if you'll sit down.'

'There. (One kiss.) Now, what ever, what ever is the matter?'

'I do mean what I said. Don't; it wouldn't do.'

'Oh, Helen, stop saying "Don't"! It's ignorant. It's as if your head wasn't out of the slime. "Don't" is probably what Mrs Bast says all the day to Mr Bast.'

Helen was silent.

'Well?'

'Tell me about it first, and meanwhile perhaps I'll have got my head out of the slime.'

'That's better. Well, where shall I begin? When I arrived at Waterloo—no, I'll go back before that, because I'm anxious you should know everything from the first. The "first" was about ten days ago. It was the day Mr Bast came to tea and lost his temper. I was defending him, and Mr Wilcox became jealous about me, however slightly. I thought it was the involuntary thing, which men can't help any more than we can. You know—at least, I know in my own case—when a man has said to me, "So-and-so's a pretty girl," I am seized with a momentary sourness against so-and-so, and long to tweak her ear. It's a tiresome feeling, but not an important one, and one easily manages it. But it wasn't only this in Mr Wilcox's case, I gather now.'

'Then you love him?'

Margaret considered. ‘It is wonderful knowing that a real man cares for you,’ she said. ‘The mere fact of that grows more tremendous. Remember, I’ve known and liked him steadily for nearly three years.’

‘But loved him?’

Margaret peered into her past. It is pleasant to analyse feelings while they are still only feelings, and unembodied in the social fabric. With her arm round Helen, and her eyes shifting over the view, as if this county or that could reveal the secret of her own heart, she meditated honestly, and said: ‘No.’

‘But you will?’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret, ‘of that I’m pretty sure. Indeed, I began the moment he spoke to me.’

‘And have settled to marry him?’

‘I had, but am wanting a long talk about it now. What *is* it against him, Helen? You must try and say.’

Helen, in her turn, looked outwards. ‘It is ever since Paul,’ she said finally.

‘But what has Mr Wilcox to do with Paul?’

‘But he was there, they were all there that morning when I came down to breakfast, and saw that Paul was frightened—the man who loved me frightened and all his paraphernalia fallen, so that I knew it was impossible, because personal relations are the important thing for ever and ever, and not this outer life of telegrams and anger.’

She poured the sentence forth in one breath, but her sister understood it, because it touched on thoughts that were familiar between them.

‘That’s foolish. In the first place, I disagree about the outer life. Well, we’ve often argued that. The real point is that there is the widest gulf between my love-making and yours. Yours was romance; mine will be prose. I’m not running it down—a very good kind of prose, but well considered, well thought out. For instance, I know all Mr Wilcox’s faults. He’s afraid of emotion. He cares too much about success, too little about the past. His sympathy lacks poetry, and so isn’t sympathy really. I’d even say’—she looked at the shining lagoons—’that, spiritually, he’s not as honest as I am. Doesn’t that satisfy you?’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ said Helen. ‘It makes me feel worse and worse. You must be mad.’

Margaret made a movement of irritation.

‘I don’t intend him, or any man or any woman, to be all my life—good heavens, no! There are heaps of things in me that he doesn’t, and shall never, understand.’

Thus she spoke before the wedding ceremony and the physical union, before the astonishing glass shade had fallen that interposes between married couples and the world. She was to keep her independence more than do most women as yet. Marriage was to alter her fortunes rather than her character, and she was not far wrong in boasting that she understood her future husband. Yet he did alter her character—a little. There was an unforeseen surprise, a cessation of the winds and odours of life, a social pressure that would have her think conjugally.

‘So with him,’ she continued. ‘There are heaps of things in him—more especially things that he does—that will always be hidden from me. He has all those public qualities which you so despise and enable all this—’ She waved her hand at the landscape, which confirmed anything. ‘If Wilcoxes hadn’t worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn’t sit here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No—perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm. More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it. There are times when it seems to me—’

‘And to me, and to all women. So one kissed Paul.’

‘That’s brutal,’ said Margaret. ‘Mine is an absolutely different case. I’ve thought things out.’

‘It makes no difference thinking things out. They come to the same.’

‘Rubbish!’

There was a long silence, during which the tide returned into Poole harbour. ‘One would lose something,’ murmured Helen, apparently to herself. The water crept over the mudflats towards the gorse and the blackened heather. Branksea Island lost its immense foreshores, and became a sombre episode of trees. Frome was forced inward towards Dorchester, Stour against Wimborne, Avon towards Salisbury, and over the immense displacement the sun presided, leading it to triumph ere he sank to rest. England was alive, throbbing through all her estuaries, crying for joy through the mouths of all her gulls, and the north wind, with contrary motion, blew stronger against her rising seas. What did it mean? For what end are her fair complexities, her changes of soil, her sinuous coast? Does she belong to those who have moulded her and made her feared by other lands, or to those who have added nothing to her power, but have somehow seen her, seen the whole island at once, lying as a jewel in a silver sea,[3] sailing as a ship of souls, with all the brave world’s fleet accompanying her towards eternity?

XX

MARGARET HAD OFTEN WONDERED at the disturbance that takes place in the world’s waters when Love, who seems so tiny a pebble, slips in. Whom does Love concern beyond the beloved and the lover? Yet his impact deluges a hundred

shores. No doubt the disturbance is really the spirit of the generations, welcoming the new generations, and chafing against the ultimate Fate, who holds all the seas in the palm of her hand. But Love cannot understand this. He cannot comprehend another's infinity; he is conscious only of his own—flying sunbeam, falling rose, pebble that asks for one quiet plunge below the fretting interplay of space and time. He knows that he will survive at the end of things, and be gathered by Fate as a jewel from the slime, and be handed with admiration round the assembly of the gods. 'Men did produce this,' they will say, and, saying, they will give men immortality. But meanwhile—what agitations meanwhile! The foundations of Property and Propriety are laid bare, twin rocks; Family Pride flounders to the surface, puffing and blowing, and refusing to be comforted; Theology, vaguely ascetic, gets up a nasty ground-swell. Then the lawyers are aroused—cold brood—and creep out of their holes. They do what they can; they tidy up Property and Propriety, reassure Theology and Family Pride. Half-guineas are poured on the troubled waters, the lawyers creep back, and, if all has gone well, Love joins one man and woman together in Matrimony.

Margaret had expected the disturbance, and was not irritated by it. For a sensitive woman she had steady nerves, and could bear with the incongruous and the grotesque; and, besides, there was nothing excessive about her love affair. Good humour was the dominant note of her relations with Mr Wilcox, or, as I must now call him, Henry. Henry did not encourage Romance, and she was no girl to fidget for it. An acquaintance had become a lover, might become a husband, but would retain all that she had noted in the acquaintance; and love must confirm an old relation rather than reveal a new one.

In this spirit she promised to marry him.

He was in Swanage on the morrow, bearing the engagement ring. They greeted one another with a hearty cordiality that impressed Aunt Juley. Henry dined at The Bays, but had engaged a bedroom in the principal hotel; he was one of those men who know the principal hotel by instinct. After dinner he asked Margaret if she wouldn't care for a turn on the Parade. She accepted, and could not repress a little tremor; it would be her first real love scene. But as she put on her hat she burst out laughing. Love was so unlike the article served up in books; the joy, though genuine, was different; the mystery an unexpected mystery. For one thing, Mr Wilcox still seemed a stranger.

For a time they talked about the ring; then she said:

'Do you remember the Embankment at Chelsea? It can't be ten days ago.'

'Yes,' he said, laughing. 'And you and your sister were head and ears deep in some quixotic scheme. Ah well!'

'I little thought then, certainly. Did you?'

'I don't know about that; I shouldn't like to say.'

'Why, was it earlier?' she cried. 'Did you think of me this way earlier? How extraordinarily interesting, Henry! Tell me.'

But Henry had no intention of telling. Perhaps he could not have told, for his mental states became obscure as soon as he had passed through them. He misliked the very word 'interesting', connoting it with wasted energy and even with morbidity. Hard facts were enough for him.

'I didn't think of it,' she pursued. 'No; when you spoke to me in the drawing-room, that was practically the first. It was all so different from what it's supposed to be. On the stage, or in books, a proposal is—how shall I put it?—a full-blown affair, a kind of bouquet; it loses its literal meaning. But in life a proposal really is a proposal—'

'By the way—'

'—a suggestion, a seed,' she concluded; and the thought flew away into darkness.

'I was thinking, if you don't mind, that we ought to spend this evening in a business talk; there will be so much to settle.'

'I think so too. Tell me, in the first place, how did you get on with Tibby?'

'With your brother?'

'Yes, during cigarettes.'

'Oh, very well.'

'I am so glad,' she answered, a little surprised. 'What did you talk about? Me, presumably.'

'About Greece too.'

'Greece was a very good card, Henry. Tibby's only a boy still, and one has to pick and choose subjects a little. Well done.'

'I was telling him I have shares in a currant farm near Calamata.'

'What a delightful thing to have shares in! Can't we go there for our honeymoon?'

'What to do?'

'To eat the currants. And isn't there marvellous scenery?'

'Moderately, but it's not the kind of place one could possibly go to with a lady.'

'Why not?'

'No hotels.'

'Some ladies do without hotels. Are you aware that Helen and I have walked alone over the Apennines, with our luggage on our backs?'

'I wasn't aware, and, if I can manage it, you will never do such a thing again.'

She said more gravely: 'You haven't found time for a talk with Helen yet, I suppose?'

'No.'

‘Do, before you go. I am so anxious you two should be friends.’

‘Your sister and I have always hit it off,’ he said negligently. ‘But we’re drifting away from our business. Let me begin at the beginning. You know that Evie is going to marry Percy Cahill.’

‘Dolly’s uncle.’

‘Exactly. The girl’s madly in love with him. A very good sort of fellow, but he demands—and rightly—a suitable provision with her. And in the second place, you will naturally understand, there is Charles. Before leaving town, I wrote Charles a very careful letter. You see, he has an increasing family and increasing expenses, and the I. and W.A.[1] is nothing particular just now, though capable of development.’

‘Poor fellow!’ murmured Margaret, looking out to sea, and not understanding.

‘Charles being the elder son, some day Charles will have Howards End; but I am anxious, in my own happiness, not to be unjust to others.’

‘Of course not,’ she began, and then gave a little cry. ‘You mean money. How stupid I am! Of course not!’

Oddly enough, he winced a little at the word. ‘Yes. Money, since you put it so frankly. I am determined to be just to all—just to you, just to them. I am determined that my children shall have no case against me.’

‘Be generous to them,’ she said sharply. ‘Bother justice!’

‘I am determined—and have already written to Charles to that effect—’

‘But how much have you got?’

‘What?’

‘How much have you a year? I’ve six hundred.’

‘My income?’

‘Yes. We must begin with how much you have, before we can settle how much you can give Charles. Justice, and even generosity, depend on that.’

‘I must say you’re a downright young woman,’ he observed, patting her arm and laughing a little. ‘What a question to spring on a fellow!’

‘Don’t you know your income? Or don’t you want to tell it me?’

‘I—’

‘That’s all right’—now she patted him—’don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. I can do the sum just as well by proportion. Divide your income into ten parts. How many parts would you give to Evie, how many to Charles, how many to Paul?’

‘The fact is, my dear, I hadn’t any intention of bothering you with details. I only wanted to let you know that—well, that something must be done for the others, and you’ve understood me perfectly, so let’s pass on to the next point.’

‘Yes, we’ve settled that,’ said Margaret, undisturbed by his strategic blunderings. ‘Go ahead; give away all you can, bearing in mind I’ve a clear six hundred. What a mercy it is to have all this money about one!’

‘We’ve none too much, I assure you; you’re marrying a poor man.’

‘Helen wouldn’t agree with me here,’ she continued. ‘Helen daren’t slang the rich being rich herself, but she would like to. There’s an odd notion, that I haven’t yet got hold of, running about at the back of her brain, that poverty is somehow “real”. She dislikes all organization, and probably confuses wealth with the technique of wealth. Sovereigns in a stocking wouldn’t bother her; cheques do. Helen is too relentless. One can’t deal in her high-handed manner with the world.’

‘There’s this other point, and then I must go back to my hotel and write some letters. What’s to be done now about the house in Ducie Street?’

‘Keep it on—at least, it depends. When do you want to marry me?’

She raised her voice, as too often, and some youths, who were also taking the evening air, overheard her. ‘Getting a bit hot, eh?’ said one. Mr Wilcox turned on them, and said sharply, ‘I say!’ There was silence. ‘Take care I don’t report you to the police.’ They moved away quietly enough, but were only biding their time, and the rest of the conversation was punctuated by peals of ungovernable laughter.

Lowering his voice and infusing a hint of reproof into it, he said: ‘Evie will probably be married in September. We could scarcely think of anything before then.’

‘The earlier the nicer, Henry. Females are not supposed to say such things, but the earlier the nicer.’

‘How about September for us too?’ he asked, rather dryly.

‘Right. Shall we go into Ducie Street ourselves in September? Or shall we try to bounce Helen and Tibby into it? That’s rather an idea. They are so unbusinesslike, we could make them do anything by judicious management. Look here—yes. We’ll do that. And we ourselves could live at Howards End or Shropshire.’

He blew out his cheeks. ‘Heavens! How you women do fly round! My head’s in a whirl. Point by point, Margaret. Howards End’s impossible. I let it to Hamar Bryce on a three years’ agreement last March. Don’t you remember? Oniton. Well, that is much, much too far away to rely on entirely. You will be able to be down there entertaining a certain amount, but we must have a house within easy reach of town. Only Ducie Street has huge drawbacks. There’s a mews behind.’[2]

Margaret could not help laughing. It was the first she had heard of the mews behind Ducie Street. When she was a possible tenant it had suppressed itself, not consciously, but automatically. The breezy Wilcox manner, though genuine, lacked the clearness of vision that is imperative for truth. When Henry lived in Ducie Street he remembered the mews; when he tried to let he forgot it; and if anyone had remarked that the mews must be either

there or not he would have felt annoyed, and afterwards have found some opportunity of stigmatizing the speaker as academic. So does my grocer stigmatize me when I complain of the quality of his sultanas, and he answers in one breath that they are the best sultanas, and how can I expect the best sultanas at that price? It is a flaw inherent in the business mind, and Margaret may do well to be tender to it, considering all that the business mind has done for England.

'Yes, in summer especially, the mews is a serious nuisance. The smoking-room, too, is an abominable little den. The house opposite has been taken by operatic people. Ducie Street's going down, it's my private opinion.'

'How sad! It's only a few years since they built those pretty houses.'

'Shows things are moving. Good for trade.'

'I hate this continual flux of London. It is an epitome of us at our worst—eternal formlessness; all the qualities, good, bad and an different, streaming away—streaming, streaming for ever. That's why I dread it so. I mistrust rivers, even in scenery. Now, the sea—'

'High tide, yes.'

'Hoy toid'—from the promenading youths.

'And these are the men to whom we give the vote,' observed Mr Wilcox, omitting to add that they were also the men to whom he gave work as clerks—work that scarcely encouraged them to grow into other men. 'However, they have their own lives and interests. Let's get on.'

He turned as he spoke, and prepared to see her back to The Bays. The business was over. His hotel was in the opposite direction, and if he accompanied her his letters would be late for the post. She implored him not to come, but he was obdurate.

'A nice beginning, if your aunt saw you slip in alone!'

'But I always do go about alone. Considering I've walked over the Apennines, it's common sense. You will make me so angry. I don't the least take it as a compliment.'

He laughed, and lit a cigar. 'It isn't meant as a compliment, my dear. I just won't have you going about in the dark. Such people about too! It's dangerous.'

'Can't I look after myself? I do wish—'

'Come along, Margaret; no wheedling.'

A younger woman might have resented his masterly ways, but Margaret had too firm a grip of life to make a fuss. She was, in her own way, as masterly. If he was a fortress she was a mountain peak, whom all might tread, but whom the snows made nightly virginal. Disdaining the heroic outfit, excitable in her methods, garrulous, episodical, shrill, she misled her lover much as she had misled her aunt. He mistook her fertility for weakness. He supposed her 'as clever as they make 'em', but no more, not realizing that she was penetrating to the depths of his soul, and approving of what she found there.

And if insight were sufficient, if the inner life were the whole of life, their happiness had been assured.

They walked ahead briskly. The parade and the road after it were well-lighted, but it was darker in Aunt Juley's garden. As they were going up by the side path, through some rhododendrons, Mr Wilcox, who was in front, said 'Margaret' rather huskily, turned, dropped his cigar, and took her in his arms.

She was startled, and nearly screamed, but recovered herself at once, and kissed with genuine love the lips that were pressed against her own. It was their first kiss, and when it was over he saw her safely to the door and rang the bell for her, but disappeared into the night before the maid answered it. On looking back; the incident displeased her. It was so isolated. Nothing in their previous conversation had heralded it, and, worse still, no tenderness had ensued. If a man cannot lead up to passion he can at all events lead down from it, and she had hoped, after her complaisance, for some interchange of gentle words. But he had hurried away as if ashamed, and for an instant she was reminded of Helen and Paul.

XXI

CHARLES HAD JUST BEEN scolding his Dolly. She deserved the scolding, and had bent before it, but her head, though bloody, was unsubdued, and her chirrupings began to mingle with his retreating thunder.

'You've woken the baby. I knew you would. (Rum-ti-foo, Rackety-tackety-Tompkin!) I'm not responsible for what Uncle Percy does, nor for anybody else or anything, so there!'

'Who asked him while I was away? Who asked my sister down to meet him? Who sent them out in the motor day after day?'

'Charles, that reminds me of some poem.'

'Does it indeed? We shall all be dancing to a very different music presently. Miss Schlegel has fairly got us on toast.'

'I could simply scratch that woman's eyes out, and to say it's my fault is most unfair.'

'It's your fault, and five minutes ago you admitted it.'

'I didn't.'

‘You did.’

‘Tootle, tootle, playing on the pootle!’ exclaimed Dolly, suddenly devoting herself to the child.

‘It’s all very well to turn the conversation, but father would never have dreamt of marrying as long as Evie was there to make him comfortable. But you must needs start match-making. Besides, Cahill’s too old.’

‘Of course, if you’re going to be rude to Uncle Percy—’

‘Miss Schlegel always meant to get hold of Howards End, and, thanks to you, she’s got it.’

‘I call the way you twist things round and make them hang together most unfair. You couldn’t have been nastier if you’d caught me flirting. Could he, diddums?’

‘We’re in a bad hole, and must make the best of it. I shall answer the pater’s letter civilly. He’s evidently anxious to do the decent thing. But I do not intend to forget these Schlegels in a hurry. As long as they’re on their best behaviour—Dolly, are you listening?—we’ll behave, too. But if I find them giving themselves airs, or monopolizing my father, or at all ill-treating him, or worrying him with their artistic beastliness, I intend to put my foot down, yes, firmly. Taking my mother’s place! Heaven knows what poor old Paul will say when the news reaches him.’

The interlude closes. It has taken place in Charles’s garden at Hilton. He and Dolly are sitting in deckchairs, and their motor is regarding them placidly from its garage across the lawn. A short-frocked edition of Charles also regards them placidly; a perambulator edition is squeaking; a third edition is expected shortly. Nature is turning out Wilcoxes in this peaceful abode, so that they may inherit the earth.

XXII

MARGARET GREETED HER LORD with peculiar tenderness on the morrow. Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the gray, sober against the fire. Happy the man who sees from either aspect the glory of those outspread wings. The roads of his soul lie clear, and he and his friends shall find easy going.

It was hard going in the roads of Mr Wilcox’s soul. From boy-hood he had neglected them. ‘I am not a fellow who bothers about my own inside.’ Outwardly he was cheerful, reliable and brave; but within, all had reverted to chaos, ruled, so far as it was ruled at all, by an incomplete asceticism. Whether as boy, husband or widower, he had always the sneaking belief that bodily passion is bad, a belief that is desirable only when held passionately. Religion bad confirmed him. The words that were read aloud on Sunday to him and to other respectable men were the words that had once kindled the souls of St Catharine and St Francis[1] into a white-hot hatred of the carnal. He could not be as the saints and love the Infinite with a seraphic ardour, but he could be a little ashamed of loving a wife. ‘Amabat; amare timebat.’[2] And it was here that Margaret hoped to help him.

It did not seem so difficult. She need trouble him with no gift of her own. She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

Nor was the message difficult to give. It need not take the form of a ‘good talking’. By quiet indications the bridge would be built and span their lives with beauty.

But she failed. For there was one quality in Henry for which she was never prepared, however much she reminded herself of it: his obtuseness. He simply did not notice things, and there was no more to be said. He never noticed that Helen and Frieda were hostile, or that Tibby was not interested in currant plantations; he never noticed the lights and shades that exist in the grayest conversation, the fingerposts, the milestones, the collisions, the illimitable views. Once—on another occasion—she scolded him about it. He was puzzled, but replied with a laugh: ‘My motto is Concentrate. I’ve no intention of frittering away my strength on that sort of thing.’ ‘It isn’t frittering away the strength,’ she protested. ‘It’s enlarging the space in which you may be strong.’ He answered: ‘You’re a clever little woman, but my motto’s Concentrate.’ And this morning he concentrated with a vengeance.

They met in the rhododendrons of yesterday. In the daylight the bushes were inconsiderable and the path was bright in the morning sun. She was with Helen, who had been ominously quiet since the affair was settled. ‘Here we all are!’ she cried, and took him by one hand, retaining her sister’s in the other.

‘Here we are. Good morning, Helen.’

Helen replied, ‘Good morning, Mr Wilcox.’

‘Henry, she has had such a nice letter from the queer, cross boy. Do you remember him? He had a sad moustache, but the back of his head was young.’

‘I have had a letter too. Not a nice one—I want to talk it over with you’; for Leonard Bast was nothing to him now that she had given him her word; the triangle of sex was broken for ever.

‘Thanks to your hint, he’s clearing out of the Porphyrion.’

‘Not a bad business that Porphyrion,’ he said absently, as he took his own letter out of his pocket.

‘Not a *bad*—’ she exclaimed, dropping his hand. ‘Surely, on Chelsea Embankment—’

‘Here’s our hostess. Good morning, Mrs Munt. Fine rhododendrons. Good morning, Frau Liesecke; we manage to grow flowers in England, don’t we?’

‘Not a *bad* business?’

‘No. My letter’s about Howards End. Bryce has been ordered abroad, and wants to sublet it. I am far from sure that I shall give him permission. There was no clause in the agreement. In my opinion, subletting is a mistake. If he can find me another tenant, whom I consider suitable, I may cancel the agreement. Morning, Schlegel. Don’t you think that’s better than subletting?’

Helen had dropped her hand now, and he had steered her past the whole party to the seaward side of the house. Beneath them was the bourgeois little bay, which must have yearned all through the centuries for just such a watering-place as Swanage to be built on its margin. The waves were colourless, and the Bournemouth steamer, drawn up against the pier and hooting wildly for excursionists, gave a further touch of insipidity.

‘When there is a sublet I find that damage—’

‘Do excuse me, but about the Porphyrion. I don’t feel easy—might I just bother you, Henry?’

Her manner was so serious that he stopped, and asked her a little sharply what she wanted.

‘You said on Chelsea Embankment, surely, that it was a bad concern, so we advised this clerk to clear out. He writes this morning that he’s taken our advice, and now you say it’s *not* a bad concern.’

‘A clerk who clears out of any concern, good or bad, without securing a berth somewhere else first is a fool, and I’ve no pity for him.’

‘He has not done that. He’s going into a bank in Camden Town, he says. The salary’s much lower, but he hopes to manage—a branch of Dempster’s Bank. Is that all right?’

‘Dempster! My goodness me, yes.’

‘More right than the Porphyrion?’

‘Yes, yes, yes, safe as houses—safer.’

‘Very many thanks. I’m sorry—if you sublet—?’

‘If he sublets, I shan’t have the same control. In theory there should be no more damage done at Howards End; in practice there will be. Things may be done for which no money can compensate. For instance, I shouldn’t want that fine wych-elm spoilt. It hangs—Margaret, we must go and see the old place some time. It’s pretty in its way. We’ll motor down and have lunch with Charles.’

‘I should enjoy that,’ said Margaret bravely.

‘What about next Wednesday?’

‘Wednesday? No, I couldn’t well do that. Aunt Juley expects us to stop here another week at least.’

‘But you can give that up now.’

‘Er—no,’ said Margaret, after a moment’s thought.

‘Oh, that’ll be all right. I’ll speak to her.’

‘This visit is a high solemnity. My aunt counts on it year after year. She turns the house upside down for us; she invites our special friends—she scarcely knows Frieda, and we can’t leave her on her hands. I missed one day, and she would be so hurt if I didn’t stay the full ten.’

‘But I’ll say a word to her. Don’t you bother.’

‘Henry, I won’t go. Don’t bully me.’

‘You want to see the house, though?’

‘Very much—I’ve heard so much about it, one way or the other. Aren’t there pig’s teeth in the wych-elm?’

‘*Pig’s teeth*?’

‘And you chew the bark for toothache.’

‘What a rum notion! Of course not!’

‘Perhaps I have confused it with some other tree. There are still a great number of sacred trees in England, it seems.’

But he left her to intercept Mrs Munt, whose voice could be heard in the distance; to be intercepted himself by Helen.

‘Oh, Mr Wilcox, about the Porphyrion—’ she began, and went scarlet all over her face.

‘It’s all right,’ called Margaret, catching them up. ‘Dempster’s Bank’s better.’

‘But I think you told us the Porphyrion was bad, and would smash before Christmas.’

‘Did I? It was still outside the Tariff Ring, and had to take rotten policies. Lately it came in—safe as houses now.’

‘In other words, Mr Bast need never have left it.’

‘No, the fellow needn’t.’

‘—and needn’t have started life elsewhere at a greatly reduced salary.’

‘He only says “reduced”,’ corrected Margaret, seeing trouble ahead.

‘With a man so poor, every reduction must be great. I consider it a deplorable misfortune.’

Mr Wilcox, intent on his business with Mrs Munt, was going steadily on, but the last remark made him say: ‘What? What’s that? Do you mean that I’m responsible?’

‘You’re ridiculous, Helen.’

‘You seem to think—’ He looked at his watch. ‘Let me explain the point to you. It is like this. You seem to

assume, when a business concern is conducting a delicate negotiation it ought to keep the public informed stage by stage. The Porphyrion, according to you, was bound to say: “I am trying all I can to get into the Tariff Ring. I am not sure that I shall succeed, but it is the only thing that will save me from insolvency, and I am trying.” My dear Helen—’

‘Is that your point? A man who had little money has less—that’s mine.’

‘I am grieved for your clerk. But it is all in the day’s work. It’s part of the battle of life.’

‘A man who had little money,’ she repeated, ‘has less, owing to us. Under these circumstances I do not consider “the battle of life” a happy expression.’

‘Oh come, come!’ he protested pleasantly. ‘You’re not to blame. No one’s to blame.’

‘Is no one to blame for anything?’

‘I wouldn’t say that, but you’re taking it far too seriously. Who is the fellow?’

‘We have told you about the fellow twice already,’ said Helen. ‘You have even met the fellow. He is very poor and his wife is an extravagant imbecile. He is capable of better things. We—we, the upper classes—thought we would help him from the height of our superior knowledge—and here’s the result!’

He raised his finger. ‘Now, a word of advice.’

‘I require no more advice.’

‘A word of advice. Don’t take up that sentimental attitude over the poor. See that she doesn’t, Margaret. The poor are poor, and one’s sorry for them, but there it is. As civilization moves forward, the shoe is bound to pinch in places, and it’s absurd to pretend that anyone is responsible personally. Neither you, nor I, nor my informant, nor the man who informed him, nor the directors of the Porphyrion, are to blame for this clerk’s loss of salary. It’s just the shoe pinching—no one can help it; and it might easily have been worse.’

Helen quivered with indignation.

‘By all means subscribe to charities—subscribe to them largely—but don’t get carried away by absurd schemes of Social Reform. I see a good deal behind the scenes, and you can take it from me that there is no Social Question—except for a few journalists who try to get a living out of the phrase. There are just rich and poor, as there always have been and always will be. Point me out a time when men have been equal—’

‘I didn’t say—’

‘Point me out a time when desire for equality has made them happier. No, no. You can’t. There always have been rich and poor. I’m no fatalist. Heaven forbid! But our civilization is moulded by great impersonal forces’ (his voice grew complacent; it always did when he eliminated the personal), ‘and there always will be rich and poor. You can’t deny it’ (and now it was a respectful voice)—’and you can’t deny that, in spite of all, the tendency of civilization has on the whole been upward.’

‘Owing to God, I suppose,’ flashed Helen.

He stared at her.

‘You grab the dollars. God does the rest.’

It was no good instructing the girl if she was going to talk about God in that neurotic modern way. Fraternal to the last, he left her for the quieter company of Mrs Munt. He thought, ‘She rather reminds me of Dolly.’

Helen looked out at the sea.

‘Don’t ever discuss political economy with Henry,’ advised her sister. ‘It’ll only end in a cry.’

‘But he must be one of those men who have reconciled science with religion,’ said Helen slowly. ‘I don’t like those men. They are scientific themselves, and talk of the survival of the fittest, and cut down the salaries of their clerks, and stunt the independence of all who may menace their comfort, but yet they believe that somehow good—it is always that sloppy “somehow”—will be the outcome, and that in some mystical way the Mr Basts of the future will benefit because the Mr Basts of today are in pain.’

‘He is such a man in theory. But oh, Helen, in theory!’

‘But oh, Meg, what a theory!’

‘Why should you put things so bitterly, dearie?’

‘Because I’m an old maid,’ said Helen, biting her lip. ‘I can’t think why I go on like this myself.’ She shook off her sister’s hand and went into the house. Margaret, distressed at the day’s beginning, followed the Bournemouth steamer with her eyes. She saw that Helen’s nerves were exasperated by the unlucky Bast business beyond the bounds of politeness. There might at any minute be a real explosion, which even Henry would notice. Henry must be removed.

‘Margaret!’ her aunt called. ‘Magsy! It isn’t true, surely, what Mr Wilcox says, that you want to go away early next week?’

‘Not “want”,’ was Margaret’s prompt reply; ‘but there is so much to be settled, and I do want to see the Charleses.’

‘But going away without taking the Weymouth trip, or even the Lulworth?’ said Mrs Munt, coming nearer. ‘Without going once more up Nine Barrows Down?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Mr Wilcox rejoined her with, ‘Good! I did the breaking of the ice.’

A wave of tenderness came over her. She put a hand on either shoulder, and looked deeply into the black, bright eyes. What was behind their competent stare? She knew, but was not disquieted.

XXIII

MARGARET HAD NO INTENTION of letting things slide, and the evening before she left Swanage she gave her sister a thorough scolding. She censured her, not for disapproving of the engagement, but for throwing over her disapproval a veil of mystery. Helen was equally frank. 'Yes,' she said, with the air of one looking inwards, 'there is a mystery. I can't help it. It's not my fault. It's the way life has been made.' Helen in those days was over-interested in the subconscious self. She exaggerated the Punch and Judy aspect of life, and spoke of mankind as puppets, whom an invisible showman twitches into love and war. Margaret pointed out that if she dwelt on this she, too, would eliminate the personal. Helen was silent for a minute, and then burst into a queer speech, which cleared the air. 'Go on and marry him. I think you're splendid; and if anyone can pull it off you will.' Margaret denied that there was anything to 'pull off', but Helen continued: 'Yes, there is, and I wasn't up to it with Paul. I can only do what's easy. I can only entice and be enticed. I can't, and won't, attempt difficult relations. If I marry, it will either be a man who's strong enough to boss me or whom I'm strong enough to boss. So I shan't ever marry, for there aren't such men. And heaven help anyone whom I do marry, for I shall certainly run away from him before you can say Jack Robinson. There! Because I'm uneducated. But you, you're different; you're a heroine.'

'Oh, Helen! Am I? Will it be as dreadful for poor Henry as all that?'

'You mean to keep proportion, and that's heroic, it's Greek, and I don't see why it shouldn't succeed with you. Go on and fight with him and help him. Don't ask *me* for help, or even for sympathy. Henceforward I'm going my own way. I mean to be thorough, because thoroughness is easy. I mean to dislike your husband, and to tell him so. I mean to make no concessions to Tibby. If Tibby wants to live with me, he must lump me. I mean to love *you* more than ever. Yes, I do. You and I have built up something real, because it is purely spiritual. There's no veil of mystery over us. Unreality and mystery begin as soon as one touches the body. The popular view is, as usual, exactly the wrong one. Our bothers are over tangible things—money, husbands, house-hunting. But heaven will work of itself.'

Margaret was grateful for this expression of affection, and answered: 'Perhaps.' All vistas close in the unseen—no one doubts it—but Helen closed them rather too quickly for her taste. At every turn of speech one was confronted with reality and the absolute. Perhaps Margaret grew too old for metaphysics, perhaps Henry was weaning her from them, but she felt that there was something a little unbalanced in the mind that so readily shreds the visible. The businessman who assumes that this life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth. 'Yes, I see, dear; it's about halfway between,' Aunt Juley had hazarded in earlier years. No; truth, being alive, was not halfway between anything. It was only to be found by continuous excursions into either realm, and, though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to ensure sterility.

Helen, agreeing here, disagreeing there, would have talked till midnight, but Margaret, with her packing to do, focused the conversation on Henry. She might abuse Henry behind his back, but please would she always be civil to him in company? 'I definitely dislike him, but I'll do what I can,' promised Helen. 'Do what you can with my friends in return.'

This conversation made Margaret easier. Their inner life was so safe that they could bargain over externals in a way that would have been incredible to Aunt Juley, and impossible for Tibby or Charles. There are moments when the inner life actually 'pays', when years of self-scrutiny, conducted for no ulterior motive, are suddenly of practical use. Such moments are still rare in the West; that they come at all promises a fairer future. Margaret, though unable to understand her sister, was assured against estrangement, and returned to London with a more peaceful mind.

The following morning, at eleven o'clock, she presented herself at the offices of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company. She was glad to go there, for Henry had implied his business rather than described it, and the formlessness and vagueness that one associates with Africa itself had hitherto brooded over the main sources of his wealth. Not that a visit to the office cleared things up. There was just the ordinary surface scum of ledgers and polished counters and brass bars that began and stopped for no possible reason, of electric-light globes blossoming in triplets, of little rabbit-hutches faced with glass or wire, of little rabbits. And even when she penetrated to the inner depths she found only the ordinary table and Turkey carpet, and though the map over the fireplace did depict a helping of West Africa it was a very ordinary map. Another map hung opposite, on which the whole continent appeared, looking like a whale marked out for blubber, and by its side was a door, shut, but Henry's voice came through it, dictating a 'strong' letter. She might have been at the Porphyrion or Dempster's Bank, or her own wine-merchant's. Everything seems just alike in these days. But perhaps she was seeing the Imperial side of the company rather than its West African, and Imperialism always had been one of her difficulties.

'One minute!' called Mr Wilcox on receiving her name. He touched a bell, the effect of which was to produce Charles.

Charles had written his father an adequate letter—more adequate than Evie's, through which a girlish indignation throbbed. And he greeted his future stepmother with propriety.

'I hope that my wife—how do you do?—will give you a decent lunch,' was his opening. 'I left instructions, but we live in a rough-and-ready way. She expects you back to tea, too, after you have had a look at Howards End. I

wonder what you'll think of the place. I wouldn't touch it with tongs myself. Do sit down! It's a measly little place.'

'I shall enjoy seeing it,' said Margaret, feeling, for the first time, shy.

'You'll see it at its worst, for Bryce decamped abroad last Monday without even arranging for a charwoman to clear up after him. I never saw such a disgraceful mess. It's unbelievable. He wasn't in the house a month.'

'I've more than a little bone to pick with Bryce,' called Henry from the inner chamber.

'Why did he go so suddenly?'

'Invalid type; couldn't sleep.'

'Poor fellow!'

'Poor fiddlesticks!' said Mr Wilcox, joining them. 'He had the impudence to put up notice-boards without so much as saying with your leave or by your leave. Charles flung them down.'

'Yes, I flung them down,' said Charles modestly.

'I've sent a telegram after him, and a pretty sharp one, too. He, and he in person, is responsible for the upkeep of that house for the next three years.'

'The keys are at the farm; we wouldn't have the keys.'

'Quite right.'

'Dolly would have taken them, but I was in, fortunately.'

'What's Mr Bryce like?' asked Margaret.

But nobody cared. Mr Bryce was the tenant who had no right to sublet; to have defined him further was a waste of time. On his misdeeds they descanted profusely, until the girl who had been typing the strong letter came out with it. Mr Wilcox added his signature. 'Now we'll be off,' said he.

A motor-drive, a form of felicity detested by Margaret, awaited her. Charles saw them in, civil to the last, and in a moment the offices of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company faded away. But it was not an impressive drive. Perhaps the weather was to blame, being grey and banked high with weary clouds. Perhaps Hertfordshire is scarcely intended for motorists. Did not a gentleman once motor so quickly through Westmorland that he missed it? And if Westmorland can be missed it will fare ill with a county whose delicate structure particularly needs the attentive eye. Hertfordshire is England at its quietest, with little emphasis of river and hill; it is England meditative. If Drayton[1] were with us again to write a new edition of his incomparable poem, he would sing the nymphs of Hertfordshire as indeterminate of feature, with hair obfuscated by the London smoke. Their eyes would be sad, and averted from their fate towards the northern flats, their leader not Isis[2] or Sabrina,[3] but the slowly flowing Lea.[4] No glory of raiment would be theirs, no urgency of dance; but they would be real nymphs.

The chauffeur could not travel as quickly as he had hoped, for the Great North Road was full of Easter traffic. But he went quite quick enough for Margaret, a poor-spirited creature, who had chickens and children on the brain.

'They're all right,' said Mr Wilcox. 'They'll learn—like the swallows and the telegraph-wires.'

'Yes, but while they're learning—'

'The motor's come to stay,' he answered. 'One must get about. There's a pretty church—oh, you aren't sharp enough. Well, look out, if the road worries you—right outward at the scenery.'

She looked at the scenery. It heaved and merged like porridge. Presently it congealed. They had arrived.

Charles's house on the left; on the right the swelling forms of the Six Hills. Their appearance in such a neighbourhood surprised her. They interrupted the stream of residences that was thickening up towards Hilton. Beyond them she saw meadows and a wood, and beneath them she settled that soldiers of the best kind lay buried. She hated war and liked soldiers—it was one of her amiable inconsistencies.

But here was Dolly, dressed up to the nines, standing at the door to greet them, and here were the first drops of the rain. They ran in gaily, and after a long wait in the drawing-room sat down to the rough-and-ready lunch, every dish in which concealed or exuded cream. Mr Bryce was the chief topic of conversation. Dolly described his visit with the key, while her father-in-law gave satisfaction by chaffing her and contradicting all she said. It was evidently the custom to laugh at Dolly. He chaffed Margaret, too, and Margaret, roused from a grave meditation, was pleased, and chaffed him back. Dolly seemed surprised, and eyed her curiously. After lunch the two children came down. Margaret disliked babies, but hit it off better with the two-year-old, and sent Dolly into fits of laughter by talking sense to him. 'Kiss them now, and come away,' said Mr Wilcox. She came, but refused to kiss them; it was such hard luck on the little things, she said, and, though Dolly proffered Chorlyworly and Porgly-woggles in turn, she was obdurate.

By this time it was raining steadily. The car came round with the hood up, and again she lost all sense of space. In a few minutes they stopped, and Crane opened the door of the car.

'What's happened?' asked Margaret.

'What do you suppose?' said Henry.

A little porch was close up against her face.

'Are we there already?'

'We are.'

'Well, I never! In years ago it seemed so far away.'

Smiling, but somehow disillusioned, she jumped out, and her impetus carried her to the front door. She was about to open it, when Henry said: 'That's no good; it's locked. Who's got the key?'

As he had himself forgotten to call for the key at the farm, no one replied. He also wanted to know who had left the front gate open, since a cow had strayed in from the road, and was spoiling the croquet lawn. Then he said, rather crossly, 'Margaret, you wait in the dry. I'll go down for the key. It isn't a hundred yards.'

'Mayn't I come too?'

'No; I shall be back before I'm gone.'

Then the car turned away, and it was as if a curtain had risen. For the second time that day she saw the appearance of the earth.

There were the greengage trees that Helen had once described, there the tennis lawn, there the hedge that would be glorious with dog-roses in June, but the vision now was of black and palest green. Down by the dell-hole more vivid colours were awakening, and Lent lilies stood sentinel on its margin, or advanced in battalions over the grass. Tulips were a tray of jewels. She could not see the wych-elm tree, but a branch of the celebrated vine studded with velvet knobs, had covered the porch. She was struck by the fertility of the soil; she had seldom been in a garden where the flowers looked so well, and even the weeds she was idly plucking out of the porch were intensely green. Why had poor Mr Bryce fled from all this beauty? For she had already decided that the place was beautiful.

'Naughty cow! Go away!' cried Margaret to the cow, but without indignation.

Harder came the rain, pouring out of a windless sky, and spattering up from the notice-boards of the house-agents, which lay in a row on the lawn where Charles had hurled them. She must have interviewed Charles in another world—where one did have interviews. How Helen would revel in such a notion! Charles dead, all people dead, nothing alive but houses and gardens. The obvious dead, the intangible alive, and—no connection at all between them! Margaret smiled. Would that her own fancies were as clear-cut! Would that she could deal as high-handedly with the world! Smiling and sighing, she laid her hand upon the door. It opened. The house was not locked up at all.

She hesitated. Ought she to wait for Henry? He felt strongly about property, and might prefer to show her over himself. On the other hand, he had told her to keep in the dry and the porch was beginning to drip. So she went in, and the draught from inside slammed the door behind.

Desolation greeted her. Dirty finger-prints were on the hall windows, flue and rubbish on its unwashed boards. The civilization of luggage had been here for a month, and then decamped. Dining-room and drawing-room—right and left—were guessed only by their wallpapers. They were just rooms where one could shelter from the rain. Across the ceiling of each ran a great beam. The dining-room and hall revealed theirs openly, but the drawing-room's was match-boarded—because the facts of life must be concealed from ladies? Drawing-room, dining-room and hall—how petty the names sounded! Here were simply three rooms where children could play and friends shelter from the rain. Yes, and they were beautiful.

Then she opened one of the doors opposite—there were two—and exchanged wallpapers for whitewash. It was the servants' part, though she scarcely realized that: just rooms again, where friends might shelter. The garden at the back was full of flowering cherries and plums. Further on were hints of the meadow and a black cliff of pines. Yes, the meadow was beautiful.

Penned in by the desolate weather, she recaptured the sense of space which the motor had tried to rob from her. She remembered again that ten square miles are not ten times as wonderful as one square mile, that a thousand square miles are not practically the same as heaven. The phantom of bigness, which London encourages, was laid for ever when she paced from the hall at Howards End to its kitchen and heard the rains run this way and that where the watershed of the roof divided them.

Now Helen came to her mind, scrutinizing half Wessex from the ridge of the Purbeck downs, and saying: 'You will have to lose something.' She was not so sure. For instance, she would double her kingdom by opening the door that concealed the stairs.

Now she thought of the map of Africa; of empires; of her father; of the two supreme nations, streams of whose life warmed her blood, but, mingling, had cooled her brain. She paced back into the hall, and as she did so the house reverberated.

'Is that you, Henry?' she called.

There was no answer, but the house reverberated again.

'Henry, have you got in?'

But it was the heart of the house beating, faintly at first, then loudly, martially. It dominated the rain.

It is the starved imagination, not the well-nourished, that is afraid. Margaret flung open the door to the stairs. A noise as of drums seemed to deafen her. A woman, an old woman, was descending, with figure erect, with face impassive, with lips that parted and said dryly:

'Oh! Well, I took you for Ruth Wilcox.'

Margaret stammered: 'I—Mrs Wilcox—I?'

'In fancy, of course—in fancy. You had her way of walking. Good day.' And the old woman passed out into the rain.

XXIV

'IT GAVE HER QUITE a turn,' said Mr Wilcox, when retailing the incident to Dolly at tea-time. 'None of you girls have any nerves, really. Of course, a word from me put it all right, but silly old Miss Avery—she frightened you, didn't she, Margaret? There you stood clutching a bunch of weeds. She might have said something, instead of coming down the stairs with that alarming bonnet on. I passed her as I came in. Enough to make the car shy. I believe Miss Avery goes in for being a character; some old maids do.' He lit a cigarette. 'It is their last resource. Heaven knows what she was doing in the place; but that's Bryce's business, not mine.'

'I wasn't as foolish as you suggest,' said Margaret. 'She only startled me, for the house had been silent so long.'

'Did you take her for a spook?' asked Dolly, for whom 'spooks' and 'going to church' summarized the unseen.

'Not exactly.'

'She really did frighten you,' said Henry, who was far from discouraging timidity in females. 'Poor Margaret! And very naturally. Uneducated classes are so stupid.'

'Is Miss Avery uneducated classes?' Margaret asked, and found herself looking at the decoration scheme of Dolly's drawing-room.

'She's just one of the crew at the farm. People like that always assume things. She assumed you'd know who she was. She left all the Howards End keys in the front lobby, and assumed that you'd seen them as you came in, that you'd lock up the house when you'd done, and would bring them on down to her. And there was her niece hunting for them down at the farm. Lack of education makes people very casual. Hilton was full of women like Miss Avery once.'

'I shouldn't have disliked it, perhaps.'

'Or Miss Avery giving me a wedding present,' said Dolly.

Which was illogical but interesting. Through Dolly, Margaret was destined to learn a good deal.

'But Charles said I must try not to mind, because she had known his grandmother.'

'As usual, you've got the story wrong, my good Dorothea.'

'I meant great-grandmother—the one who left Mrs Wilcox the house. Weren't both of them and Miss Avery friends when Howards End, too, was a farm?'

Her father-in-law blew out a shaft of smoke. His attitude to his dead wife was curious. He would allude to her, and hear her discussed, but never mentioned her by name. Nor was he interested in the dim, bucolic past. Dolly was—for the following reason.

'Then hadn't Mrs Wilcox a brother—or was it an uncle? Anyhow, he popped the question, and Miss Avery, she said "No". Just imagine, if she'd said "Yes" she would have been Charles's aunt. (Oh, I say, that's rather good! "Charlie's Aunt!" I must chaff him about that this evening.) And the man went out and was killed. Yes, I'm certain I've got it right now. Tom Howard—he was the last of them.'

'I believe so,' said Mr Wilcox negligently.

'I say! Howards End—Howards Ended!' cried Dolly. 'I'm rather on the spot this evening, eh?'

'I wish you'd ask whether Crane's ended.'

'Oh, Mr Wilcox, how *can* you?'

'Because, if he has had enough tea, we ought to go—Dolly's a good little woman,' he continued, 'but a little of her goes a long way. I wouldn't live near her if you paid me.'

Margaret smiled. Though presenting a firm front to outsiders, no Wilcox could live near, or near the possessions of, any other Wilcox. They had the colonial spirit, and were always making for some spot where the white man might carry his burden unobserved. Of course, Howards End was impossible, so long as the younger couple were established in Hilton. His objections to the house were plain as daylight now.

Crane had had enough tea, and was sent to the garage, where their car had been trickling muddy water over Charles's. The downpour had surely penetrated the Six Hills by now, bringing news of our restless civilization. 'Curious mounds,' said Henry, 'but in with you now; another time.' He had to be up in London by seven—if possible, by six-thirty. Once more she lost the sense of space; once more trees, houses, people, animals, hills, merged and heaved into one dirtiness, and she was at Wickham Place.

Her evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time. She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little. She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from Howards End, she attempted to realize England. She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. But an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable. Helen and her father had known this love, poor Leonard Bast was groping after it, but it had been hidden from Margaret till this afternoon. It had certainly come through the house and old Miss Avery. Through them: the notion of 'through' persisted; her mind trembled towards a conclusion which only the unwise have put into words. Then, veering back into warmth, it dwelt on ruddy bricks, flowering plum trees, and all the tangible joys of spring.

Henry, after allaying her agitation, had taken her over his property, and had explained to her the use and dimensions of the various rooms. He had sketched the history of the little estate. 'It is so unlucky,' ran the

monologue, ‘that money wasn’t put into it about fifty years ago. Then it had four—five—times the land—thirty acres at least. One could have made something out of it then—a small park, or at all events shrubberies, and rebuilt the house further away from the road. What’s the good of taking it in hand now? Nothing but the meadow left, and even that was heavily mortgaged when I first had to do with things—yes, and the house too. Oh, it was no joke.’ She saw two women as he spoke, one old, the other young, watching their inheritance melt away. She saw them greet him as a deliverer. ‘Mismanagement did it—besides, the days for small farms are over. It doesn’t pay—except with intensive cultivation. Smallholdings, back to the land—ah! Philanthropic bunkum. Take it as a rule that nothing pays on a small scale. Most of the land you see’ (they were standing at an upper window, the only one which faced west) ‘belongs to the people at the Park—they made their pile over copper—good chaps. Avery’s Farm, Sishe’s—what they call the Common, where you see that ruined oak—one after the other fell in, and so did this, as near as is no matter.’ But Henry had saved it; without fine feelings or deep insight, but he had saved it, and she loved him for the deed. ‘When I had more control I did what I could: sold off the two and a half animals, and the mangy pony, and the superannuated tools; pulled down the outhouses; drained; thinned out I don’t know how many guelder roses and elder trees; and inside the house I turned the old kitchen into a hall, and made a kitchen behind where the dairy was. Garage and so on came later. But one could still tell it’s been an old farm. And yet it isn’t the place that would fetch one of your artistic crew.’ No, it wasn’t, and if he did not quite understand it the artistic crew would still less: it was English, and the wych-elm that she saw from the window was an English tree. No report had prepared her for its peculiar glory. It was neither warrior, nor lover, nor god; in none of these roles do the English excel. It was a comrade, bending over the house, strength and adventure in its roots, but in its utmost fingers tenderness, and the girth, that a dozen men could not have spanned, became in the end evanescent, till pale bud clusters seemed to float in the air. It was a comrade. House and tree transcended any simile of sex, Margaret thought of them now, and was to think of them through many a windy night and London day, but to compare either to man, to woman, always dwarfed the vision. Yet they kept within limits of the human. Their message was not of eternity, but of hope on this side of the grave. As she stood in the one, gazing at the other, truer relationships had gleamed.

Another touch, and the account of her day is finished. They ventured into the garden for a minute, and to Mr Wilcox’s surprise she was right. Teeth, pigs’ teeth, could be seen in the bark of the wychelm tree—just the white tips of them showing. ‘Extraordinary!’ he cried. ‘Who told you?’

‘I heard of it one winter in London,’ was her answer, for she, too, avoided mentioning Mrs Wilcox by name.

XXV

EVIE HEARD OF HER father's engagement when she was in for a tennis tournament, and her play went simply to pot. That she should marry and leave him had seemed natural enough; that he, left alone, should do the same was deceitful; and now Charles and Dolly said that it was all her fault. 'But I never dreamt of such a thing,' she grumbled. 'Dad took me to call now and then, and made me ask him to Simpson's. Well, I'm altogether off Dad.' It was also an insult to their mother's memory; there they were agreed, and Evie had the idea of returning Mrs Wilcox's lace and jewellery 'as a protest'. Against what it would protest she was not clear; but, being only eighteen, the idea of renunciation appealed to her, the more as she did not care for jewellery or lace. Dolly then suggested that she and Uncle Percy should pretend to break off their engagement, and then perhaps Mr Wilcox would quarrel with Miss Schlegel, and break off his; or Paul might be cabled for. But at this point Charles told them not to talk nonsense. So Evie settled to marry, as soon as possible; it was no good hanging about with these Schlegels eyeing her. The date of her wedding was consequently put forward from September to August, and in the intoxication of presents she recovered much of her good humour.

Margaret found that she was expected to figure at this function, and to figure largely; it would be such an opportunity, said Henry, for her to get to know his set. Sir James Bidder would be there, and all the Cahills and the Fussells, and his sister-in-law, Mrs Warrington Wilcox, had fortunately got back from her tour round the world. Henry she loved, but his set promised to be another matter. He had not the knack of surrounding himself with nice people—indeed, for a man of ability and virtue his choice had been singularly unfortunate; he had no guiding principle beyond a certain preference for mediocrity; he was content to settle one of the greatest things in life haphazard, and so, while his investments went right, his friends generally went wrong. She would be told, 'Oh, So-and-so's a good sort—a thundering good sort,' and find on meeting him, that he was a brute or a bore. If Henry had shown real affection, she would have understood, for affection explains everything. But he seemed without sentiment. The 'thundering good sort' might at any moment become 'a fellow for whom I never did have much use, and have less now', and be shaken off cheerily into oblivion. Margaret had done the same as a schoolgirl. Now she never forgot anyone for whom she had once cared; she connected, though the connection might be bitter, and she hoped that some day Henry would do the same.

Evie was not to be married from Ducie Street. She had a fancy for something rural, and, besides, no one would be in London then, so she left her boxes for a few weeks at Oniton Grange, and her banns were duly published in the parish church, and for a couple of days the little town, dreaming between the ruddy hills, was roused by the clang of our civilization, and drew up by the roadside to let the motors pass. Oniton had been a discovery of Mr Wilcox's—a discovery of which he was not altogether proud. It was up towards the Welsh border, and so difficult of access that he had concluded it must be something special. A ruined castle stood in the grounds. But having got there what was one to do? The shooting was bad, the fishing indifferent, and womenfolk reported the scenery as nothing much. The place turned out to be in the wrong part of Shropshire, damn it, and, though he never damned his own property aloud, he was only waiting to get it off his hands, and then to let fly. Evie's marriage was its last appearance in public. As soon as a tenant was found, it became a house for which he never had had much use, and had less now, and, like Howards End, faded into limbo.

But on Margaret Oniton was destined to make a lasting impression. She regarded it as her future home, and was anxious to start straight with the clergy, etc., and, if possible, to see something of the local life. It was a market-town—as tiny a one as England possesses—and had for ages served that lonely valley, and guarded our marches against the Celt. In spite of the occasion, in spite of the numbing hilarity that greeted her as soon as she got into the reserved saloon at Paddington, her senses were awake and watching, and though Oniton was to prove one of her innumerable false starts she never forgot it, nor the things that happened there.

The London party only numbered eight—the Fussells, father and son, two Anglo-Indian ladies named Mrs Plynlimmon and Lady Edser, Mrs Warrington Wilcox and her daughter, and, lastly, the little girl, very smart and quiet, who figures at so many weddings, and who kept a watchful eye on Margaret, the bride-elect. Dolly was absent—a domestic event detained her at Hilton; Paul had cabled a humorous message; Charles was to meet them with a trio of motors at Shrewsbury. Helen had refused her invitation; Tibby had never answered his. The management was excellent, as was to be expected with anything that Henry undertook; one was conscious of his sensible and generous brain in the background. They were his guests as soon as they reached the train; a special label for their luggage; a courier; a special lunch; they had only to look pleasant and, where possible, pretty. Margaret thought with dismay of her own nuptials—presumably under the management of Tibby. 'Mr Theobald Schlegel and Miss Helen Schlegel request the pleasure of Mrs Plynlimmon's company on the occasion of the marriage of their sister Margaret.' The formula was incredible, but it must soon be printed and sent, and though Wickham Place need not compete with Oniton it must feed its guests properly, and provide them with sufficient chairs. Her wedding would either be ramshackly or bourgeois—she hoped the latter. Such an affair as the present, staged with a deftness that was almost beautiful, lay beyond her powers and those of her friends.

The low rich purr of a Great Western express is not the worst background for conversation, and the journey passed pleasantly enough. Nothing could have exceeded the kindness of the two men. They raised windows for some ladies, and lowered them for others, they rang the bell for the servant, they identified the colleges as the train slipped past Oxford, they caught books or bag-purses in the act of tumbling onto the floor. Yet there was nothing finicking about their politeness: it had the Public School touch, and, though sedulous, was virile. More battles than Waterloo have been won on our playing-fields,[1] and Margaret bowed to a charm of which she did not wholly approve, and said nothing when the Oxford colleges were identified wrongly. 'Male and female created He them'; the journey to Shrewsbury confirmed this questionable statement, and the long glass saloon, that moved so easily and felt so comfortable, became a forcing-house for the idea of sex.

At Shrewsbury came fresh air. Margaret was all for sight-seeing, and while the others were finishing their tea at the Raven she annexed a motor and hurried over the astonishing city. Her chauffeur was not the faithful Crane, but an Italian, who dearly loved making her late. Charles, watch in hand, though with a level brow, was standing in front of the hotel when they returned. It was perfectly all right, he told her; she was by no means the last. And then he dived into the coffee-room, and she heard him say, 'For God's sake, hurry the women up; we shall never be off,' and Albert Fussell reply, 'Not I; I've done my share,' and Colonel Fussell opine that the ladies were getting themselves up to kill. Presently Myra (Mrs Warrington's daughter) appeared, and as she was his cousin Charles blew her up a little: she had been changing her smart travelling-hat for a smart motor-hat. Then Mrs Warrington herself, leading the quiet child; the two Anglo-Indian ladies were always last. Maids, courier, heavy luggage, had already gone on by a branch-line to a station nearer Oniton, but there were five hat-boxes and four dressing-bags to be packed in, and five dust-cloaks to be put on, and to be put off at the last moment because Charles declared them not necessary. The men presided over everything with unfailing good humour. By half past five the party was ready, and went out of Shrewsbury by the Welsh Bridge.

Shropshire had not the reticence of Hertfordshire. Though robbed of half its magic by swift movement, it still conveyed the sense of hills. They were nearing the buttresses that force the Severn eastward and make it an English stream, and the sun, sinking over the sentinels of Wales, was straight in their eyes. Having picked up another guest, they turned southward, avoiding the greater mountains, but conscious of an occasional summit, rounded and mild, whose colouring differed in quality from that of the lower earth, and whose contours altered more slowly. Quiet mysteries were in progress behind those tossing horizons: the west, as ever, was retreating with some secret which may not be worth the discovery, but which no practical man will ever discover.

They spoke of Tariff Reform.[2]

Mrs Warrington was just back from the Colonies. Like many other critics of Empire, her mouth had been stopped with food, and she could only exclaim at the hospitality with which she had been received, and warn the Mother Country against trifling with young Titans. 'They threaten to cut the painter,' she cried, 'and where shall we be then? Miss Schlegel, you'll undertake to keep Henry sound about Tariff Reform? It is our last hope.'

Margaret playfully confessed herself on the other side, and they began to quote from their respective handbooks while the motor carried them deeper into the hills. Curious these were rather than impressive, for their outlines lacked beauty, and the pink fields on their summits suggested the handkerchiefs of a giant spread out to dry. An occasional outcrop of rock, an occasional wood, an occasional 'forest', treeless and brown, all hinted at wildness to follow, but the main colour was an agricultural green. The air grew cooler; they had surmounted the last gradient, and Oniton lay below them with its church, its radiating houses, its castle, its river-girt peninsula. Close to the castle was a grey mansion, unintellectual but kindly, stretching with its grounds across the peninsula's neck—the sort of mansion that was built all over England in the beginning of the last century, while architecture was still an expression of the national character. That was the Grange, remarked Albert, over his shoulder, and then he jammed the brake on, and the motor slowed down and stopped. 'I'm sorry,' said he, turning round. 'Do you mind getting out—by the door on the right. Steady on.'

'What's happened?' asked Mrs Warrington.

Then the car behind them drew up, and the voice of Charles was heard saying: 'Get out the women at once.' There was a concourse of males, and Margaret and her companions were hustled out and received into the second car. What had happened? As it started off again, the door of a cottage opened, and a girl screamed wildly at them.

'What is it?' the ladies cried.

Charles drove them a hundred yards without speaking. Then he said, 'It's all right. Your car just touched a dog.'

'But stop!' cried Margaret, horrified.

'It didn't hurt him.'

'Didn't really hurt him?' asked Myra.

'No.'

'Do *please* stop!' said Margaret, leaning forward. She was standing up in the car, the other occupants holding her knees to steady her. 'I want to go back, please.'

Charles took no notice.

'We've left Mr Fussell behind,' said another; 'and Angelo, and Crane.'

'Yes, but no woman.'

'I expect a little of'—Mrs Warrington scratched her palm—'will be more to the point than one of us!'

'The insurance company see to that,' remarked Charles, 'and Albert will do the talking.'

'I want to go back, though, I say!' repeated Margaret, getting angry.

Charles took no notice. The motor, loaded with refugees, continued to travel very slowly down the hill. 'The men are there,' chorused the others. 'Men will see to it.'

'The men *can't* see to it. Oh, this is ridiculous! Charles, I ask you to stop.'

'Stopping's no good,' drawled Charles.

'Isn't it?' said Margaret, and jumped straight out of the car.

She fell on her knees, cut her gloves, shook her hat over her ear. Cries of alarm followed her. 'You've hurt yourself,' exclaimed Charles, jumping after her.

'Of course I've hurt myself!' she retorted.

'May I ask what—'

'There's nothing to ask,' said Margaret.

'Your hand's bleeding.'

'I know.'

'I'm in for a frightful row from the pater.'

'You should have thought of that sooner, Charles.'

Charles had never been in such a position before. It was a woman in revolt who was hobbling away from him, and the sight was too strange to leave any room for anger. He recovered himself when the others caught them up; their sort he understood. He commanded them to go back.

Albert Fussell was seen walking towards them.

'It's all right!' he called. 'It wasn't a dog, it was a cat.'

'There!' exclaimed Charles triumphantly. 'It's only a rotten cat.'

'Got room in your car for a little 'un? I cut as soon as I saw it wasn't a dog; the chauffeurs are tackling the girl.' But Margaret walked forward steadily. Why should the chauffeurs tackle the girl? Ladies sheltering behind men, men sheltering behind servants—the whole system's wrong, and she must challenge it.

'Miss Schlegel! 'Pon my word, you've hurt your hand.'

'I'm just going to see,' said Margaret. 'Don't you wait, Mr Fussell.'

The second motor came round the corner. 'It is all right, madam,' said Crane in his turn. He had taken to call her madam.

'What's all right? The cat?'

'Yes, madam. The girl will receive compensation for it.'

'She was a very ruda girla,' said Angelo from the third motor thoughtfully.

'Wouldn't you have been rude?'

The Italian spread out his hands, implying that he had not thought of rudeness, but would produce it if it pleased her. The situation became absurd. The gentlemen were again buzzing round Miss Schlegel with offers of assistance, and Lady Edser began to bind up her hand. She yielded, apologizing slightly, and was led back to the car, and soon the landscape resumed its motion, the lonely cottage disappeared, the castle swelled on its cushion of turf, and they had arrived. No doubt she had disgraced herself. But she felt their whole journey from London had been unreal. They had no part with the earth and its emotions. They were dust, and a stink, and cosmopolitan chatter, and the girl whose cat had been killed had lived more deeply than they.

'Oh, Henry,' she exclaimed, 'I have been so naughty,' for she had decided to take up this line. 'We ran over a cat. Charles told me not to jump out, but I would, and look!' She held out her bandaged hand. 'Your poor Meg went such a flop.'

Mr Wilcox looked bewildered. In evening dress, he was standing to welcome his guests in the hall.

'Thinking it was a dog,' added Mrs Warrington.

'Ah, a dog's a companion!' said Colonel Fussell. 'A dog'll remember you.'

'Have you hurt yourself, Margaret?'

'Not to speak about; and it's my left hand.'

'Well, hurry up and change.'

She obeyed, as did the others. Mr Wilcox then turned to his son.

'Now, Charles, what's happened?'

Charles was absolutely honest. He described what he believed to have happened. Albert had flattened out a cat, and Miss Schlegel had lost her nerve, as any woman might. She had been got safely into the other car, but when it was in motion had leapt out again, in spite of all that they could say. After walking a little on the road, she had calmed down and had said that she was sorry. His father accepted this explanation, and neither knew that Margaret had artfully prepared the way for it. It fitted in too well with their view of feminine nature. In the smoking-room, after dinner, the Colonel put forward the view that Miss Schlegel had jumped it out of devilry. Well he remembered as a young man, in the harbour of Gibraltar once, how a girl—a handsome girl, too—had jumped overboard for a bet. He could see her now, and all the lads overboard after her. But Charles and Mr Wilcox agreed it was much more probably nerves in Miss Schlegel's case. Charles was depressed. That woman had a tongue. She would bring worse disgrace on his father before she had done with them. He strolled out on to the castle mound to think the matter over. The evening was exquisite. On three sides of him a little river whispered, full of messages from the west; above his head the ruins made patterns against the sky. He carefully reviewed their dealings with this family, until he fitted Helen and Margaret and Aunt Juley into an orderly conspiracy. Paternity had made him suspicious. He had two children to look after, and more coming, and day by day they seemed less likely to grow up

rich men. ‘It is all very well,’ he reflected, ‘the pater saying that he will be just to all, but one can’t be just indefinitely. Money isn’t elastic. What’s to happen if Evie has a family? And, come to that, so may the pater. There’ll not be enough to go round, for there’s none coming in, either through Dolly or Percy. It’s damnable!’ He looked enviously at the Grange, whose windows poured light and laughter. First and last, this wedding would cost a pretty penny. Two ladies were strolling up and down the garden terrace, and as the syllables ‘Imperialism’ were wafted to his ears he guessed that one of them was his aunt. She might have helped him, if she too had not had a family to provide for. ‘Everyone for himself,’ he repeated—a maxim which had cheered him in the past, but which rang grimly enough among the ruins of Oniton. He lacked his father’s ability in business, and so had an even higher regard for money; unless he could inherit plenty, he feared to leave his children poor.

As he sat thinking, one of the ladies left the terrace and walked into the meadow; he recognized her as Margaret by the white bandage that gleamed on her arm, and put out his cigar, lest the gleam should betray him. She climbed up the mound in zigzags, and at times stooped down, as if she was stroking the turf. It sounds absolutely incredible, but for a moment Charles thought that she was in love with him, and had come out to tempt him. Charles believed in temptresses, who are indeed the strong man’s necessary complement, and having no sense of humour he could not purge himself of the thought by a smile. Margaret, who was engaged to his father, and his sister’s wedding-guest, kept on her way without noticing him, and he admitted that he had wronged her on this point. But what was she doing? Why was she stumbling about amongst the rubble and catching her dress in brambles and burrs? As she edged round the keep, she must have got to leeward and smelt his cigar-smoke, for she exclaimed, ‘Hullo! Who’s that?’

Charles made no answer.

‘Saxon or Celt?’ she continued, laughing in the darkness. ‘But it doesn’t matter. Whichever you are, you will have to listen to me. I love this place. I love Shropshire. I hate London. I am glad that this will be my home. Ah, dear’—she was now moving back towards the house—’what a comfort to have arrived!’

‘That woman means mischief,’ thought Charles, and compressed his lips. In a few minutes he followed her indoors, as the ground was getting damp. Mists were rising from the river, and presently it became invisible, though it whispered more loudly. There had been a heavy downpour in the Welsh hills.

XXVI

NEXT MORNING A FINE mist covered the peninsula. The weather promised well, and the outline of the castle mound grew clearer each moment that Margaret watched it. Presently she saw the keep, and the sun painted the rubble gold, and charged the white sky with blue. The shadow of the house gathered itself together and fell over the garden. A cat looked up at her window and mewed. Lastly the river appeared, still holding the mists between its banks and its overhanging alders, and only visible as far as a hill, which cut off its upper reaches.

Margaret was fascinated by Oniton. She had said that she loved it, but it was rather its romantic tension that held her. The rounded Druids[1] of whom she had caught glimpses in her drive, the rivers hurrying down from them to England, the carelessly modelled masses of the lower hills, thrilled her with poetry. The house was insignificant, but the prospect from it would be an eternal joy, and she thought of all the friends she would have to stop in it, and of the conversion of Henry himself to a rural life. Society, too, promised favourably. The rector of the parish had dined with them last night, and she found that he was a friend of her father’s, and so knew what to find in her. She liked him. He would introduce her to the town. While, on her other side, Sir James Bidder sat, repeating that she only had to give the word, and he would whip up the county families for twenty miles round. Whether Sir James, who was Garden Seeds,[2] had promised what he could perform, she doubted, but so long as Henry mistook them for the county families when they did call she was content.

Charles and Albert Fussell now crossed the lawn. They were going for a morning dip, and a servant followed them with their bathing-dresses. She had meant to take a stroll herself before breakfast, but saw that the day was still sacred to men, and amused herself by watching their contretemps. In the first place the key of the bathing-shed could not be found. Charles stood by the riverside with folded hands, tragical, while the servant shouted, and was misunderstood by another servant in the garden. Then came a difficulty about a springboard, and soon three people were running backwards and forwards over the meadow with orders and counter-orders and recriminations and apologies. If Margaret wanted to jump from a motor-car, she jumped; if Tibby thought paddling would benefit his ankles, he paddled; if a clerk desired adventure, he took a walk in the dark. But these athletes seemed paralysed. They could not bathe without their appliances, though the morning sun was calling and the last mists were rising from the dimpling stream. Had they found the life of the body after all? Could not the men whom they despised as milksops beat them, even on their own ground?

She thought of the bathing arrangements as they should be in her day—no worrying of servants, no appliances, beyond good sense. Her reflections were disturbed by the quiet child, who had come out to speak to the cat, but was now watching her watch the men. She called, ‘Good morning, dear,’ a little sharply. Her voice spread consternation. Charles looked round, and though completely attired in indigo blue vanished into the shed, and was

seen no more.

'Miss Wilcox is up—' the child whispered, and then became unintelligible.

'What's that?'

It sounded like, '—cut-yoke—sack-back—'

'I can't hear.'

'—on the bed—tissue-paper—'

Gathering that the wedding-dress was on view, and that a visit would be seemly, she went to Evie's room. All was hilarity here. Evie, in a petticoat, was dancing with one of the Anglo-Indian ladies, while the other was adoring yards of white satin. They screamed, they laughed, they sang, and the dog barked.

Margaret screamed a little too, but without conviction. She could not feel that a wedding was so funny. Perhaps something was missing in her equipment.

Evie gasped: 'Dolly is a rotter not to be here! Oh, we would rag just then!' Then Margaret went down to breakfast.

Henry was already installed; he ate slowly and spoke little, and was, in Margaret's eyes, the only member of their party who dodged emotion successfully. She could not suppose him indifferent either to the loss of his daughter or to the presence of his future wife. Yet he dwelt intact, only issuing orders occasionally—orders that promoted the comfort of his guests. He inquired after her hand; he set her to pour out the coffee and Mrs Warrington to pour out the tea. When Evie came down there was a moment's awkwardness, and both ladies rose to vacate their places. 'Burton,' called Henry, 'serve tea and coffee from the sideboard!' It wasn't genuine tact, but it was tact of a sort—the sort that is as useful as the genuine, and saves even more situations at board meetings. Henry treated a marriage like a funeral, item by item, never raising his eyes to the whole, and 'Death, where is thy sting? Love, where is thy victory?'[3] one would exclaim at the close.

After breakfast she claimed a few words with him. It was always best to approach him formally. She asked for the interview, because he was going on to shoot grouse tomorrow, and she was returning to Helen in town.

'Certainly, dear,' said he. 'Of course I have the time. What do you want?'

'Nothing.'

'I was afraid something had gone wrong.'

'No; I have nothing to say, but you may talk.'

Glancing at his watch, he talked of the nasty curve at the lych-gate. She heard him with interest. Her surface could always respond to his without contempt, though all her deeper being might be yearning to help him. She had abandoned any plan of action. Love is the best, and the more she let herself love him the more chance was there that he would set his soul in order. Such a moment as this, when they sat under fair weather by the walls of their future home, was so sweet to her that its sweetness would surely pierce to him. Each lift of his eyes, each parting of the thatched lip from the cleanshaven, must prelude the tenderness that kills the monk and the beast at a single blow. Disappointed a hundred times, she still hoped. She loved him with too clear a vision to fear his cloudiness. Whether he droned trivialities, as today, or sprang kisses on her in the twilight, she could pardon him, she could respond.

'If there is this nasty curve,' she suggested, 'couldn't we walk to the church? Not, of course, you and Evie; but the rest of us might very well go on first, and that would mean fewer carriages.'

'One can't have ladies walking through the Market Square. The Fussells wouldn't like it; they were awfully particular at Charles's wedding. My—she—one of our party was anxious to walk, and certainly the church was just round the corner, and I shouldn't have minded; but the Colonel made a great point of it.'

'You men shouldn't be so chivalrous,' said Margaret thoughtfully.

'Why not?'

She knew why not, but said that she did not know. He then announced that, unless she had anything special to say, he must visit the wine-cellar, and they went off together in search of Burton. Though clumsy and a little inconvenient, Oniton was a genuine country house. They clattered down flagged passages, looking into room after room, and scaring unknown maids from the performance of obscure duties. The wedding breakfast must be in readiness when they came back from church, and tea would be served in the garden. The sight of so many agitated and serious people made Margaret smile, but she reflected that they were paid to be serious, and enjoyed being agitated. Here were the lower wheels of the machine that was tossing Evie up into nuptial glory. A little boy blocked their way with pig-pails. His mind could not grasp their greatness, and he said: 'By your leave; let me pass, please.' Henry asked him where Burton was. But the servants were so new that they did not know one another's names. In the still-room sat the band, who had stipulated for champagne as part of their fee, and who were already drinking beer. Scents of Araby came from the kitchen, mingled with cries. Margaret knew what had happened there, for it happened at Wickham Place. One of the wedding dishes had boiled over, and the cook was throwing cedar shavings to hide the smell. At last they came upon the butler. Henry gave him the keys, and handed Margaret down the cellar stairs. Two doors were unlocked. She, who kept all her wine at the bottom of the linen-cupboard, was astonished at the sight. 'We shall never get through it!' she cried, and the two men were suddenly drawn into brotherhood, and exchanged smiles. She felt as if she had again jumped out of the car while it was moving.

Certainly Oniton would take some digesting. It would be no small business to remain herself, and yet to assimilate such an establishment. She must remain herself, for his sake as well as her own, since a shadowy wife

degrades the husband whom she accompanies; and she must assimilate for reasons of common honesty, since she had no right to marry a man and make him uncomfortable. Her only ally was the power of Home. The loss of Wickham Place had taught her more than its possession. Howards End had repeated the lesson. She was determined to create new sanctities among these hills.

After visiting the wine-cellar, she dressed, and then came the wedding, which seemed a small affair when compared with the preparations for it. Everything went like one o'clock. Mr Cahill materialized out of space, and was waiting for his bride at the church door. No one dropped the ring or mispronounced the responses, or trod on Evie's train, or cried. In a few minutes the clergymen performed their duty, the register was signed, and they were back in their carriages, negotiating the dangerous curve by the lychgate. Margaret was convinced that they had not been married at all, and that the Norman church had been intent all the time on other business.

There were more documents to sign at the house, and the breakfast to eat, and then a few more people dropped in for the garden party. There had been a great many refusals, and after all it was not a very big affair—not as big as Margaret's would be. She noted the dishes and the strips of red carpet, that outwardly she might give Henry what was proper. But inwardly she hoped for something better than this blend of Sunday church and fox-hunting. If only someone *had* been upset! But this wedding had gone off so particularly well—'quite like a Durbar' in the opinion of Lady Edser, and she thoroughly agreed with her.

So the wasted day lumbered forward, the bride and bridegroom drove off, yelling with laughter, and for the second time the sun retreated towards the hills of Wales. Henry, who was more tired than he owned, came up to her in the castle meadow, and, in tones of unusual softness, said that he was pleased. Everything had gone off so well. She felt that he was praising her, too, and blushed; certainly she had done all she could with his intractable friends, and had made a special point of kowtowing to the men. They were breaking camp this evening: only the Warringtons and quiet child would stay the night, and the others were already moving towards the house to finish their packing. 'I think it did go off well,' she agreed. 'Since I had to jump out of the motor, I'm thankful I lighted on my left hand. I am so very glad about it, Henry dear; I only hope that the guests at ours may be half as comfortable. You must all remember that we have no practical person among us, except my aunt, and she is not used to entertainments on a large scale.'

'I know,' he said gravely. 'Under the circumstances, it would be better to put everything into the hands of Harrod's or Whiteley's, or even to go to some hotel.'

'You advise a hotel?'

'Yes, because—well, I mustn't interfere with you. No doubt you want to be married from your old home.'

'My old home's falling into pieces, Henry. I only want my new. Isn't it a perfect evening—'

'The Alexandrina isn't bad—'

'The Alexandrina,' she echoed, more occupied with the threads of smoke that were issuing from their chimneys, and ruling the sunlit slopes with parallels of grey.

'It's off Curzon Street.'

'Is it? Let's be married from off Curzon Street.'

Then she turned westward, to gaze at the swirling gold. Just where the river rounded the hill the sun caught it. Fairyland must lie above the bend, and its precious liquid was pouring towards them past Charles's bathing-shed. She gazed so long that her eyes were dazzled, and when they moved back to the house she could not recognize the faces of people who were coming out of it. A parlourmaid was preceding them.

'Who are those people?' she asked.

'They're callers!' exclaimed Henry. 'It's too late for callers.'

'Perhaps they're town people who want to see the wedding presents.'

'I'm not at home yet to townees.'

'Well, hide among the ruins, and if I can stop them I will.'

He thanked her.

Margaret went forward, smiling socially. She supposed that these were unpunctual guests, who would have to be content with vicarious civility, since Evie and Charles were gone, Henry tired, and the others in their rooms. She assumed the airs of a hostess; not for long. For one of the group was Helen—Helen in her oldest clothes, and dominated by that tense, wounding excitement that had made her a terror in their nursery days.

'What is it?' she called. 'Oh, what's wrong? Is Tibby ill?'

Helen spoke to her two companions, who fell back. Then she bore forward furiously.

'They're starving!' she shouted. 'I found them starving!'

'Who? Why have you come?'

'The Basts.'

'Oh, Helen!' moaned Margaret. 'What ever have you done now?'

'He has lost his place. He has been turned out of his bank. Yes, he's done for. We upper classes have ruined him, and I suppose you'll tell me it's the battle of life. Starving. His wife is ill. Starving. She fainted in the train.'

'Helen, are you mad?'

'Perhaps. Yes. If you like, I'm mad. But I've brought them. I'll stand injustice no longer. I'll show up the wretchedness that lies under this luxury, this talk of impersonal forces, this cant about God doing what we're too slack to do ourselves.'

'Have you actually brought two starving people from London to Shropshire, Helen?'

Helen was checked. She had not thought of this, and her hysteria abated. ‘There was a restaurant car on the train,’ she said.

‘Don’t be absurd. They aren’t starving, and you know it. Now, begin from the beginning. I won’t have such theatrical nonsense. How dare you! Yes, how dare you!’ she repeated, as anger filled her, ‘bursting into Evie’s wedding in this heartless way. My goodness! but you’ve a perverted notion of philanthropy. Look’—she indicated the house—’servants, people out of the windows. They think it’s some vulgar scandal, and I must explain. “Oh no, it’s only my sister screaming, and only two hangers-on of ours, whom she has brought here for no conceivable reason.”’

‘Kindly take back that word “hangers-on”,’ said Helen, ominously calm.

‘Very well,’ conceded Margaret, who for all her wrath was determined to avoid a real quarrel. ‘I, too, am sorry about them, but it beats me why you’ve brought them here, or why you’re here yourself.’

‘It’s our last chance of seeing Mr Wilcox.’

Margaret moved towards the house at this. She was determined not to worry Henry.

‘He’s going to Scotland. I know he is. I insist on seeing him.’

‘Yes, tomorrow.’

‘I knew it was our last chance.’

‘How do you do, Mr Bast?’ said Margaret, trying to control her voice. ‘This is an odd business. What view do you take of it?’

‘There is Mrs Bast, too,’ prompted Helen.

Jacky also shook hands. She, like her husband, was shy, and furthermore ill, and furthermore so bestially stupid that she could not grasp what was happening. She only knew that the lady had swept down like a whirlwind last night, had paid the rent, redeemed the furniture, provided them with a dinner and a breakfast, and ordered them to meet her at Paddington next morning. Leonard had feebly protested, and when the morning came had suggested that they shouldn’t go. But she, half mesmerized, had obeyed. The lady had told them to, and they must, and their bed-sitting room had accordingly changed into Paddington, and Paddington into a railway carriage, that shook, and grew hot, and grew cold, and vanished entirely, and reappeared amid torrents of expensive scent. ‘You have fainted,’ said the lady in an awestruck voice. ‘Perhaps the air will do you good.’ And perhaps it had, for here she was, feeling rather better among a lot of flowers.

‘I’m sure I don’t want to intrude,’ began Leonard, in answer to Margaret’s question. ‘But you have been so kind to me in the past in warning me about the Porphyrion that I wondered—why, I wondered whether—’

‘Whether we could get him back into the Porphyrion again,’ supplied Helen. ‘Meg, this has been a cheerful business. A bright evening’s work that was on Chelsea Embankment.’

Margaret shook her head and returned to Mr Bast.

‘I don’t understand. You left the Porphyrion because we suggested it was a bad concern, didn’t you?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And went into a bank instead?’

‘I told you all that,’ said Helen; ‘and they reduced their staff after he had been in a month, and now he’s penniless, and I consider that we and our informant are directly to blame.’

‘I hate all this,’ Leonard muttered.

‘I hope you do, Mr Bast. But it’s no good mincing matters. You have done yourself no good by coming here. If you intend to confront Mr Wilcox, and to call him to account for a chance remark, you will make a very great mistake.’

‘I brought them. I did it all,’ cried Helen.

‘I can only advise you to go at once. My sister has put you in a false position, and it is kindest to tell you so. It’s too late to get to town, but you’ll find a comfortable hotel in Oniton, where Mrs Bast can rest, and I hope you’ll be my guests there.’

‘That isn’t what I want, Miss Schlegel,’ said Leonard. ‘You’re very kind, and no doubt it’s a false position, but you make me miserable. I seem no good at all.’

‘It’s work he wants,’ interpreted Helen. ‘Can’t you see?’

Then he said: ‘Jacky, let’s go. We’re more bother than we’re worth. We’re costing these ladies pounds and pounds already to get work for us, and they never will. There’s nothing we’re good enough to do.’

‘We would like to find you work,’ said Margaret rather conventionally. ‘We want to—I, like my sister. You’re only down in your luck. Go to the hotel, have a good night’s rest, and some day you shall pay me back the bill, if you prefer it.’

But Leonard was near the abyss, and at such moments men see clearly. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said. ‘I shall never get work now. If rich people fail at one profession, they can try another. Not I. I had my groove, and I’ve got out of it. I could do one particular branch of insurance in one particular office well enough to command a salary, but that’s all. Poetry’s nothing, Miss Schlegel. One’s thoughts about this and that are nothing. Your money, too, is nothing, if you’ll understand me. I mean, if a man over twenty once loses his own particular job, it’s all over with him. I have seen it happen to others. Their friends give them money for a little, but in the end they fall over the edge. It’s no good. It’s the whole world pulling. There always will be rich and poor.’

He ceased. ‘Won’t you have something to eat?’ said Margaret. ‘I don’t know what to do. It isn’t my house, and though Mr Wilcox would have been glad to see you at any other time—as I say, I don’t know what to do, but I

undertake to do what I can for you. Helen, offer them something. Do try a sandwich, Mrs Bast.'

They moved to a long table behind which a servant was still standing. Iced cakes, sandwiches innumerable, coffee, claret-cup, champagne, remained almost intact: their overfed guests could do no more. Leonard refused. Jacky thought she could manage a little. Margaret left them whispering together, and had a few more words with Helen.

She said: 'Helen, I like Mr Bast. I agree that he's worth helping. I agree that we are directly responsible.'

'No, indirectly. Via Mr Wilcox.'

'Let me tell you once for all that if you take up that attitude I'll do nothing. No doubt you're right logically, and are entitled to say a great many scathing things about Henry. Only, I won't have it. So choose.'

Helen looked at the sunset.

'If you promise to take them quietly to the George, I will speak to Henry about them—in my own way, mind; there is to be none of this absurd screaming about justice. I have no use for justice. If it was only a question of money, we could do it ourselves. But he wants work, and that we can't give him, but possibly Henry can.'

'It's his duty to,' grumbled Helen.

'Nor am I concerned with duty. I'm concerned with the characters of various people whom we know, and how, things being as they are, things may be made a little better. Mr Wilcox hates being asked favours; all businessmen do. But I am going to ask him, at the risk of a rebuff, because I want to make things a little better.'

'Very well. I promise. You take it very calmly.'

'Take them off to the George, then, and I'll try. Poor creatures! but they look tired.' As they parted, she added: 'I haven't nearly done with you, though, Helen. You have been most self-indulgent. I can't get over it. You have less restraint rather than more as you grow older. Think it over and alter yourself, or we shan't have happy lives.'

She joined Henry. Fortunately he had been sitting down; these physical matters were important. 'Was it townees?' he asked, greeting her with a pleasant smile.

'You'll never believe me,' said Margaret, sitting down beside him. 'It's all right now, but it was my sister.'

'Helen here?' he cried, preparing to rise. 'But she refused the invitation. I thought she despised weddings.'

'Don't get up. She has not come to the wedding. I've bundled her off to the George.'

Inherently hospitable, he protested.

'No; she has two of her protégés with her, and must keep with them.'

'Let 'em all come.'

'My dear Henry, did you see them?'

'I did catch sight of a brown bunch of a woman, certainly.'

'The brown bunch was Helen, but did you catch sight of a sea-green and salmon bunch?'

'What! Are they out beanfeasting?'

'No; business. They wanted to see me, and later on I want to talk to you about them.'

She was ashamed at her own diplomacy. In dealing with a Wilcox, how tempting it was to lapse from comradeship, and to give him the kind of woman that he desired! Henry took the bait at once, and said: 'Why later on? Tell me now. No time like the present.'

'Shall I?'

'If it isn't a long story.'

'Oh, not five minutes; but there's a sting at the end of it, for I want you to find the man some work in your office.'

'What are his qualifications?'

'I don't know. He's a clerk.'

'How old?'

'Twenty-five, perhaps.'

'What's his name?'

'Bast,' said Margaret, and was about to remind him that they had met at Wickham Place, but stopped herself. It had not been a successful meeting.

'Where was he before?'

'Dempster's Bank.'

'Why did he leave?' he asked, still remembering nothing.

'They reduced their staff.'

'All right; I'll see him.'

It was the reward of her tact and devotion through the day. Now she understood why some women prefer influence to rights. Mrs Plynlimmon, when condemning suffragettes, had said: 'The woman who can't influence her husband to vote the way she wants ought to be ashamed of herself.' Margaret had winced, but she was influencing Henry now, and though pleased at her little victory she knew that she had won it by the methods of the harem.

'I should be glad if you took him,' she said, 'but I don't know whether he's qualified.'

'I'll do what I can. But, Margaret, this mustn't be taken as a precedent.'

'No, of course—of course—'

'I can't fit in your protégés every day. Business would suffer.'

'I can promise you he's the last. He—he's rather a special case.'

'Protégés always are.'

She let it stand at that. He rose with a little extra touch of complacency, and held out his hand to help her up. How wide the gulf between Henry as he was and Henry as Helen thought he ought to be! And she herself—hovering as usual between the two, now accepting men as they are, now yearning with her sister for Truth. Love and Truth—their warfare seems eternal. Perhaps the whole visible world rests on it, and, if they were one, life itself, like the spirits when Prospero was reconciled to his brother, might vanish into air, into thin air.[4]

'Your protégé has made us late,' said he. 'The Fussells will just be starting.'

On the whole she sided with men as they are. Henry would save the Basts as he had saved Howards End, while Helen and her friends were discussing the ethics of salvation. His was a slapdash method, but the world has been built slapdash, and the beauty of mountain and river and sunset may be but the varnish with which the unskilled artificer hides his joins. Oniton, like herself, was imperfect. Its apple trees were stunted, its castle ruinous. It, too, had suffered in the border warfare between the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt, between things as they are and as they ought to be. Once more the west was retreating, once again the orderly stars were dotting the eastern sky. There is certainly no rest for us on the earth. But there is happiness, and as Margaret descended the mound on her lover's arm she felt that she was having her share.

To her annoyance, Mrs Bast was still in the garden; the husband and Helen had left her there to finish her meal while they went to engage rooms. Margaret found this woman repellent. She had felt, when shaking her hand, an overpowering shame. She remembered the motive of her call at Wickham Place, and smelt again odours from the abyss—odours the more disturbing because they were involuntary. For there was no malice in Jacky. There she sat, a piece of cake in one hand, an empty champagne-glass in the other, doing no harm to anybody.

'She's overtired,' Margaret whispered.

'She's something else,' said Henry. 'This won't do. I can't have her in my garden in this state.'

'Is she—' Margaret hesitated to add 'drunk'. Now that she was going to marry him, he had grown particular. He discountenanced risqué conversations now.

Henry went up to the woman. She raised her face, which gleamed in the twilight like a puff-ball.

'Madam, you will be more comfortable at the hotel,' he said sharply.

Jacky replied: 'If it isn't Hen!'

'Ne crois pas que le mari lui ressemble,' apologized Margaret. 'Il est tout à fait différent.'[5]

'Henry!' she repeated, quite distinctly.

Mr Wilcox was much annoyed. 'I can't congratulate you on your protégés,' he remarked.

'Hen, don't go. You do love me, dear, don't you?'

'Bless us, what a person!' sighed Margaret, gathering up her skirts.

Jacky pointed with her cake. 'You're a nice boy, you are.' She yawned. 'There now, I love you.'

'Henry, I am awfully sorry.'

'And pray why?' he asked, and looked at her so sternly that she feared he was ill. He seemed more scandalized than the facts demanded.

'To have brought this down on you.'

'Pray don't apologize.'

The voice continued.

'Why does she call you "Hen"?' said Margaret innocently. 'Has she ever seen you before?'

'Seen Hen before!' said Jacky. 'Who hasn't seen Hen? He's serving you like me, my dear. These boys! You wait—still, we love 'em.'

'Are you now satisfied?' Henry asked.

Margaret began to grow frightened. 'I don't know what it is all about,' she said. 'Let's come in.'

But he thought she was acting. He thought he was trapped. He saw his whole life crumbling. 'Don't you indeed?' he said bitingly. 'I do. Allow me to congratulate you on the success of your plan.'

'This is Helen's plan, not mine.'

'I now understand your interest in the Basts. Very well thought out. I am amused at your caution, Margaret. You are quite right—it was necessary. I am a man, and have lived a man's past. I have the honour to release you from your engagement.'

Still she could not understand. She knew of life's seamy side as a theory; she could not grasp it as a fact. More words from Jacky were necessary—words unequivocal, undenied.

'So that—' burst from her, and she went indoors. She stopped herself from saying more.

'So what?' asked Colonel Fussell, who was getting ready to start in the hall.

'We were saying—Henry and I were just having the fiercest argument, my point being—' Seizing his fur coat from a footman, she offered to help him on. He protested, and there was a playful little scene.

'No, let me do that,' said Henry, following.

'Thanks so much! You see—he has forgiven me!'

The Colonel said gallantly: 'I don't expect there's much to forgive.'

He got into the car. The ladies followed him after an interval. Maids, courier and heavier luggage had been sent on earlier by the branch-line. Still chattering, still thanking their host and patronizing their future hostess, the guests were borne away.

Then Margaret continued: 'So that woman has been your mistress?'

'You put it with your usual delicacy,' he replied.

‘When, please?’
‘Why?’
‘When, please?’
‘Ten years ago.’
She left him without a word. For it was not her tragedy: it was Mrs Wilcox’s.

XXVII

HELEN BEGAN TO WONDER why she had spent a matter of eight pounds in making some people ill and others angry. Now that the wave of excitement was ebbing, and had left her, Mr Bast and Mrs Bast stranded for the night in a Shropshire hotel, she asked herself what forces had made the wave flow. At all events, no harm was done. Margaret would play the game properly now, and, though Helen disapproved of her sister’s methods, she knew that the Basts would benefit by them in the long run.

‘Mr Wilcox is so illogical,’ she explained to Leonard, who had put his wife to bed, and was sitting with her in the empty coffee-room. ‘If we told him it was his duty to take you on, he might refuse to do it. The fact is, he isn’t properly educated. I don’t want to set you against him, but you’ll find him a trial.’

‘I can never thank you sufficiently, Miss Schlegel,’ was all that Leonard felt equal to.

‘I believe in personal responsibility. Don’t you? And in personal everything. I hate—I suppose I oughtn’t to say that—but the Wilcoxes are on the wrong tack surely. Or perhaps it isn’t their fault. Perhaps the little thing that says “I” is missing out of the middle of their heads, and then it’s a waste of time to blame them. There’s a nightmare of a theory that says a special race is being born which will rule the rest of us in the future just because it lacks the little thing that says “I”. Had you heard that?’

‘I get no time for reading.’

‘Had you thought it, then? That there are two kinds of people—our kind, who live straight from the middle of their heads, and the other kind who can’t, because their heads have no middle? They can’t say “I”. They *aren’t* in fact, and so they’re supermen. Pierpont Morgan has never said “I” in his life.’

Leonard roused himself. If his benefactress wanted intellectual conversation, she must have it. She was more important than his ruined past. ‘I never got on to Nietzsche,’ he said. ‘But I always understood that those supermen were rather what you may call egoists.’

‘Oh no, that’s wrong,’ replied Helen. ‘No superman ever said “I want”, because “I want” must lead to the question, “Who am I?” and so to Pity and to Justice. He only says “want”. “Want Europe” if he’s Napoleon; “want wives” if he’s Bluebeard; “want Botticelli” if he’s Pierpont Morgan.[1] Never the “I”; and if you could pierce through him you’d find panic and emptiness in the middle.’

Leonard was silent for a moment. Then he said: ‘May I take it, Miss Schlegel, that you and I are both the sort that say “I”?’

‘Of course.’

‘And your sister too?’

‘Of course,’ repeated Helen, a little sharply. She was annoyed with Margaret, but did not want her discussed. ‘All presentable people say “I”.’

‘But Mr Wilcox—he is not perhaps—’

‘I don’t know that it’s any good discussing Mr Wilcox either.’

‘Quite so, quite so,’ he agreed. Helen asked herself why she had snubbed him. Once or twice during the day she had encouraged him to criticize, and then had pulled him up short. Was she afraid of him presuming? If so, it was disgusting of her.

But he was thinking the snub quite natural. Everything she did was natural, and incapable of causing offence. While the Miss Schlegels were together he had felt them scarcely human—a sort of admonitory whirligig. But a Miss Schlegel alone was different. She was in Helen’s case unmarried, in Margaret’s about to be married, in neither case an echo of her sister. A light had fallen at last into this rich upper world, and he saw that it was full of men and women, some of whom were more friendly to him than others. Helen had become ‘his’ Miss Schlegel, who scolded him and corresponded with him, and had swept down yesterday with grateful vehemence. Margaret, though not unkind, was severe and remote. He would not presume to help her, for instance. He had never liked her, and began to think that his original impression was true, and that her sister did not like her either. Helen was certainly lonely. She, who gave away so much, was receiving too little. Leonard was pleased to think that he could spare her vexation by holding his tongue and concealing what he knew about Mr Wilcox. Jacky had announced her discovery when he fetched her from the lawn. After the first shock, he did not mind for himself. By now he had no illusions about his wife, and this was only one new stain on the face of a love that had never been pure. To keep perfection perfect, that should be his ideal, if the future gave him time to have ideals. Helen, and Margaret for Helen’s sake, must not know.

Helen disconcerted him by turning the conversation to his wife. ‘Mrs Bast—does she ever say “I”?’ she asked,

half mischievously, and then, ‘Is she very tired?’

‘It’s better she stops in her room,’ said Leonard.

‘Shall I sit up with her?’

‘No, thank you; she does not need company.’

‘Mr Bast, what kind of woman is your wife?’

Leonard blushed up to his eyes.

‘You ought to know my ways by now. Does that question offend you?’

‘No, oh no, Miss Schlegel, no.’

‘Because I love honesty. Don’t pretend your marriage has been a happy one. You and she can have nothing in common.’

He did not deny it, but said shyly: ‘I suppose that’s pretty obvious; but Jacky never meant to do anybody any harm. When things went wrong, or I heard things, I used to think it was her fault, but, looking back, it’s more mine. I needn’t have married her, but as I have I must stick to her and keep her.’

‘How long have you been married?’

‘Nearly three years.’

‘What did your people say?’

‘They will not have anything to do with us. They had a sort of family council when they heard I was married, and cut us off altogether.’

Helen began to pace up and down the room. ‘My good boy, what a mess!’ she said gently. ‘Who are your people?’

He could answer this. His parents, who were dead, had been in trade; his sisters had married commercial travellers; his brother was a lay-reader.

‘And your grandparents?’

Leonard told her a secret that he had held shameful up to now. ‘They were just nothing at all,’ he said —’agricultural labourers and that sort.’

‘So! From which part?’

‘Lincolnshire mostly, but my mother’s father—he, oddly enough, came from these parts round here.’

‘From this very Shropshire. Yes, that is odd. My mother’s people were Lancashire. But why do your brother and your sisters object to Mrs Bast?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

‘Excuse me, you do know. I am not a baby. I can bear anything you tell me, and the more you tell the more I shall be able to help. Have they heard anything against her?’

He was silent.

‘I think I have guessed now,’ said Helen very gravely.

‘I don’t think so, Miss Schlegel; I hope not.’

‘We must be honest, even over these things. I have guessed. I am frightfully, dreadfully sorry, but it does not make the least difference to me. I shall feel just the same to both of you. I blame, not your wife for these things, but men.’

Leonard left it at that—so long as she did not guess the man. She stood at the window and slowly pulled up the blinds. The hotel looked over a dark square. The mists had begun. When she turned back to him her eyes were shining.

‘Don’t you worry,’ he pleaded. ‘I can’t bear that. We shall be all right if I get work. If I could only get work—something regular to do. Then it wouldn’t be so bad again. I don’t trouble after books as I used. I can imagine that with regular work we should settle down again. It stops one thinking.’

‘Settle down to what?’

‘Oh, just settle down.’

‘And that’s to be life!’ said Helen, with a catch in her throat. ‘How can you, with all the beautiful things to see and do—with music—with walking at night—’

‘Walking is well enough when a man’s in work,’ he answered. ‘Oh, I did talk a lot of nonsense once, but there’s nothing like a bailiff in the house to drive it out of you. When I saw him fingering my Ruskins and Stevensons, I seemed to see life straight real, and it isn’t a pretty sight. My books are back again, thanks to you, but they’ll never be the same to me again, and I shan’t ever again think night in the woods so wonderful.’

‘Why not?’ asked Helen, throwing up the window.

‘Because I see one must have money.’

‘Well, you’re wrong.’

‘I wish I was wrong, but—the clergyman—he has money of his own, or else he’s paid; the poet or the musician—just the same; the tramp—he’s no different. The tramp goes to the workhouse in the end, and is paid for with other people’s money. Miss Schlegel, the real thing’s money, and all the rest is a dream.’

‘You’re still wrong. You’ve forgotten Death.’

Leonard could not understand.

‘If we lived for ever, what you say would be true. But we have to die, we have to leave life presently. Injustice and greed would be the real things if we lived for ever. As it is, we must hold to other things, because Death is coming. I love Death—not morbidly, but because He explains. He shows me the emptiness of Money. Death and

Money are the eternal foes. Not Death and Life. Never mind what lies behind Death, Mr Bast, but be sure that the poet and the musician and the tramp will be happier in it than the man who has never learned to say: "I am I."'

'I wonder.'

'We are all in a mist—I know, but I can help you this far—men like the Wilcoxes are deeper in the mist than any. Sane, sound Englishmen! Building up empires, levelling all the world into what they call common sense. But mention Death to them and they're offended, because Death's really imperial, and He cries out against them for ever.'

'I am as afraid of Death as anyone.'

'But not of the idea of Death.'

'But what is the difference?'

'Infinite difference,' said Helen, more gravely than before.

Leonard looked at her wondering, and had the sense of great things sweeping out of the shrouded night. But he could not receive them, because his heart was still full of little things. As the lost umbrella had spoilt the concert at Queen's Hall, so the lost situation was obscuring the diviner harmonies now. Death, Life and Materialism were fine words, but would Mr Wilcox take him on as a clerk? Talk as one would, Mr Wilcox was king of this world, the superman, with his own morality, whose head remained in the clouds.

'I must be stupid,' he said apologetically.

While to Helen the paradox became clearer and clearer. 'Death destroys a man; the idea of Death saves him.'[2] Behind the coffins and the skeletons that stay the vulgar mind lies something so immense that all that is great in us responds to it. Men of the world may recoil from the charnel-house that they will one day enter, but Love knows better. Death is his foe, but his peer, and in their age-long struggle the thews of Love have been strengthened, and his vision cleared, until there is no one who can stand against him.

'So never give in,' continued the girl, and restated again and again the vague yet convincing plea that the Invisible lodges against the Visible. Her excitement grew as she tried to cut the rope that fastened Leonard to the earth. Woven of bitter experience, it resisted her. Presently the waitress entered and gave her a letter from Margaret. Another note, addressed to Leonard, was inside. They read them, listening to the murmurings of the river.

XXVIII

For many hours Margaret did nothing; then she controlled herself, and wrote some letters. She was too bruised to speak to Henry; she could pity him, and even determine to marry him, but as yet all lay too deep in her heart for speech. On the surface the sense of his degradation was too strong. She could not command voice or look, and the gentle words that she forced out through her pen seemed to proceed from some other person.

'My dearest boy,' she began, 'this is not to part us. It is everything or nothing, and I mean it to be nothing. It happened long before we ever met, and even if it had happened since, I should be writing the same, I hope. I do understand.'

But she crossed out 'I do understand'; it struck a false note. Henry could not bear to be understood. She also crossed out 'It is everything or nothing'. Henry would resent so strong a grasp of the situation. She must not comment; comment is unfeminine.

'I think that'll about do,' she thought.

Then the sense of his degradation choked her. Was he worth all this bother? To have yielded to a woman of that sort was everything, yes, it was, and she could not be his wife. She tried to translate his temptation into her own language, and her brain reeled. Men must be different, even to want to yield to such a temptation. Her belief in comradeship was stifled, and she saw life as from that glass saloon on the Great Western, which sheltered male and female alike from the fresh air. Are the sexes really races, each with its own code of morality, and their mutual love a mere device of Nature's to keep things going? Strip human intercourse of the proprieties, and is it reduced to this? Her judgement told her no. She knew that out of Nature's device we have built a magic that will win us immortality. Far more mysterious than the call of sex to sex is the tenderness that we throw into that call; far wider is the gulf between us and the farmyard than between the farmyard and the garbage that nourishes it. We are evolving, in ways that Science cannot measure, to ends that Theology dares not contemplate. 'Men did produce one jewel,' the gods will say, and, saying, will give us immortality. Margaret knew all this, but for the moment she could not feel it, and transformed the marriage of Evie and Mr Cahill into a carnival of fools, and her own marriage—too miserable to think of that, she tore up the letter, and then wrote another:

Dear Mr Bast,

I have spoken to Mr Wilcox about you, as I promised, and am sorry to say that he has no vacancy for you.

Yours truly,

She enclosed this in a note to Helen, over which she took less trouble than she might have done; but her head was aching, and she could not stop to pick her words:

Dear Helen,

Give him this. The Basts are no good. Henry found the woman drunk on the lawn. I am having a room got ready for you here, and will you please come round at once on getting this? The Basts are not at all the type we should trouble about. I may go round to them myself in the morning, and do anything that is fair.

M.

In writing this, Margaret felt that she was being practical. Something might be arranged for the Basts later on, but they must be silenced for the moment. She hoped to avoid a conversation between the woman and Helen. She rang the bell for a servant, but no one answered it; Mr Wilcox and the Warringtons were gone to bed, and the kitchen was abandoned to saturnalia. Consequently she went over to the George herself. She did not enter the hotel, for discussion would have been perilous, and, saying that the letter was important, she gave it to the waitress. As she recrossed the square she saw Helen and Mr Bast looking out of the window of the coffee-room, and feared she was already too late. Her task was not yet over; she ought to tell Henry what she had done.

This came easily, for she saw him in the hall. The night wind had been rattling the pictures against the wall, and the noise had disturbed him.

'Who's there?' he called, quite the householder.

Margaret walked in and past him.

'I have asked Helen to sleep,' she said. 'She is best here; so don't lock the front door.'

'I thought someone had got in,' said Henry.

'At the same time I told the man that we could do nothing for him. I don't know about later, but now the Basts must clearly go.'

'Did you say that your sister is sleeping here, after all?

'Probably.'

'Is she to be shown up to your room?'

'I have naturally nothing to say to her; I am going to bed. Will you tell the servants about Helen? Could someone go to carry her bag?'

He tapped a little gong, which had been bought to summon the servants.

'You must make more noise than that if you want them to hear.'

Henry opened a door, and down the corridor came shouts of laughter. 'Far too much screaming there,' he said, and strode towards it. Margaret went upstairs, uncertain whether to be glad that they had met, or sorry. They had behaved as if nothing had happened, and her deepest instincts told her that this was wrong. For his own sake, some explanation was due.

And yet—what would an explanation tell her? A date, a place, a few details, which she could imagine all too clearly. Now that the first shock was over, she saw that there was every reason to premise a Mrs Bast. Henry's inner life had long lain open to her—his intellectual confusion, his obtuseness to personal influence, his strong but furtive passions. Should she refuse him because his outer life corresponded? Perhaps. Perhaps, if the dishonour had been done to her, but it was done long before her day. She struggled against the feeling. She told herself that Mrs Wilcox's wrong was her own. But she was not a barren theorist. As she undressed, her anger, her regard for the dead, her desire for a scene, all grew weak. Henry must have it as he liked, for she loved him, and some day she would use her love to make him a better man.

Pity was at the bottom of her actions all through this crisis. Pity, if one may generalize, is at the bottom of woman. When men like us, it is for our better qualities, and however tender their liking we dare not be unworthy of it, or they will quietly let us go. But unworthiness stimulates woman. It brings out her deeper nature, for good or for evil.

Here was the core of the question. Henry must be forgiven, and made better by love; nothing else mattered. Mrs Wilcox, that unquiet yet kindly ghost, must be left to her own wrong. To her everything was in proportion now, and she, too, would pity the man who was blundering up and down their lives. Had Mrs Wilcox known of his trespass? An interesting question, but Margaret fell asleep, tethered by affection, and lulled by the murmurs of the river that descended all the night from Wales. She felt herself at one with her future home, colouring it and coloured by it, and awoke to see, for the second time, Oniton Castle conquering the morning mists.

XXIX

'HENRY DEAR—' was her greeting.

He had finished his breakfast, and was beginning *The Times*. His sister-in-law was packing. She knelt by him and took the paper from him, feeling that it was unusually heavy and thick. Then, putting her face where it had been, she looked up in his eyes.

'Henry dear, look at me. No, I won't have you shirking. Look at me. There. That's all.'

'You're referring to last evening,' he said huskily. 'I have released you from your engagement. I could find excuses, but I won't. No, I won't. A thousand times no. I'm a bad lot, and must be left at that.'

Expelled from his old fortress, Mr Wilcox was building a new one. He could no longer appear respectable to her, so he defended himself instead in a lurid past. It was not true repentance.

'Leave it where you will, boy. It's not going to trouble us; I know what I'm talking about, and it will make no difference.'

'No difference?' he inquired. 'No difference, when you find that I am not the fellow you thought?' He was annoyed with Miss Schlegel here. He would have preferred her to be prostrated by the blow, or even to rage. Against the tide of his sin flowed the feeling that she was not altogether womanly. Her eyes gazed too straight; they had read books that are suitable for men only. And though he had dreaded a scene, and though she had determined against one, there was a scene, all the same. It was somehow imperative.

'I am unworthy of you,' he began. 'Had I been worthy, I should not have released you from your engagement. I know what I am talking about. I can't bear to talk of such things. We had better leave it.'

She kissed his hand. He jerked it from her, and, rising to his feet, went on: 'You, with your sheltered life, and refined pursuits, and friends, and books, you and your sister, and women like you—I say, how can you guess the temptations that lie round a man?'

'It is difficult for us,' said Margaret; 'but if we are worth marrying we do guess.'

'Cut off from decent society and family ties, what do you suppose happens to thousands of young fellows overseas? Isolated. No one near. I know by bitter experience, and yet you say it makes "no difference".'

'Not to me.'

He laughed bitterly. Margaret went to the sideboard and helped herself to one of the breakfast dishes. Being the last down, she turned out the spirit-lamp that kept them warm. She was tender, but grave. She knew that Henry was not so much confessing his soul as pointing out the gulf between the male soul and the female, and she did not desire to hear him on this point.

'Did Helen come?' she asked.

He shook his head.

'But that won't do at all, at all! We don't want her gossiping with Mrs Bast.'

'Good God, no!' he exclaimed, suddenly natural. Then he caught himself up. 'Let them gossip. My game's up, though I thank you for your unselfishness—little as my thanks are worth.'

'Didn't she send me a message or anything?'

'I heard of none.'

'Would you ring the bell, please?'

'What to do?'

'Why, to inquire.'

He swaggered up to it tragically, and sounded a peal. Margaret poured herself out some coffee. The butler came, and said that Miss Schlegel had slept at the George, so far as he had heard. Should he go round to the George?

'I'll go, thank you,' said Margaret, and dismissed him.

'It is no good,' said Henry. 'Those things leak out; you cannot stop a story once it has started. I have known cases of other men—I despised them once, I thought that *I'm* different, *I* shall never be tempted. Oh, Margaret—' He came and sat down near her, improvising emotion. She could not bear to listen to him. 'We fellows all come to grief once in our time. Will you believe that? There are moments when the strongest man—"Let him who standeth, take heed lest he fall." That's true, isn't it? If you knew all, you would excuse me. I was far from good influences—far even from England. I was very, very lonely, and longed for a woman's voice. That's enough. I have told you too much already for you to forgive me now.'

'Yes, that's enough, dear.'

'I have'—he lowered his voice—'I have been through hell.'

Gravely she considered this claim. Had he? Had he suffered tortures of remorse, or had it been 'There! That's over. Now for respectable life again'? The latter, if she read him rightly. A man who has been through hell does not boast of his virility. He is humble and hides it, if, indeed, it still exists. Only in legend does the sinner come forth penitent, but terrible, to conquer pure woman by his resistless power. Henry was anxious to be terrible, but had not got it in him. He was a good average Englishman, who had slipped. The really culpable point—his faithlessness to Mrs Wilcox—never seemed to strike him. She longed to mention Mrs Wilcox.

And bit by bit the story was told her. It was a very simple story. Ten years ago was the time, a garrison town in Cyprus the place. Now and then he asked her whether she could possibly forgive him, and she answered: 'I have already forgiven you, Henry.' She chose her words carefully, and so saved him from panic. She played the girl, until he could rebuild his fortress and hide his soul from the world. When the butler came to clear away, Henry was in a very different mood—asked the fellow what he was in such a hurry for, complained of the noise last night in the servants' hall. Margaret looked intently at the butler. He, as a handsome young man, was faintly attractive to her as a woman—an attraction so faint as scarcely to be perceptible, yet the skies would have fallen if she had

mentioned it to Henry.

On her return from the George the building operations were complete, and the old Henry fronted her, competent, cynical and kind. He had made a clean breast, had been forgiven, and the great thing now was to forget his failure, and to send it the way of other unsuccessful investments. Jacky rejoined Howards End and Ducie Street, and the vermilion motor-car, and the Argentine Hard Dollars, and all the things and people for whom he had never had much use, and had less now. Their memory hampered him. He could scarcely attend to Margaret, who brought back disquieting news from the George. Helen and her clients had gone.

'Well, let them go—the man and his wife, I mean, for the more we see of your sister the better.'

'But they have gone separately—Helen very early, the Basts just before I arrived. They have left no message. They have answered neither of my notes. I don't like to think what it all means.'

'What did you say in the notes?'

'I told you last night.'

'Oh—ah—yes! Dear, would you like one turn in the garden?'

Margaret took his arm. The beautiful weather soothed her. But the wheels of Evie's wedding were still at work, tossing the guests outwards as deftly as they had drawn them in, and she could not be with him long. It had been arranged that they should motor to Shrewsbury, whence he would go north, and she back to London with the Warringtons. For a fraction of time she was happy. Then her brain recommenced.

'I am afraid there has been gossiping of some kind at the George. Helen would not have left unless she had heard something. I mismanaged that. It is wretched. I ought to have parted her from that woman at once.'

'Margaret!' he exclaimed, loosing her arm impressively.

'Yes—yes, Henry?'

'I am far from a saint—in fact, the reverse—but you have taken me, for better or worse. Bygones must be bygones. You have promised to forgive me. Margaret, a promise is a promise. Never mention that woman again.'

'Except for some practical reason—never.'

'Practical! You practical!'

'Yes, I'm practical,' she murmured, stooping over the mowing-machine and playing with the grass which trickled through her fingers like sand.

He had silenced her, but her fears made him uneasy. Not for the first time, he was threatened with blackmail. He was rich and supposed to be moral; the Basts knew that he was not, and might find it profitable to hint as much.

'At all events, you mustn't worry,' he said. 'This is a man's business.' He thought intently. 'On no account mention it to anybody.'

Margaret flushed at advice so elementary, but he was really paving the way for a lie. If necessary he would deny that he had ever known Mrs Bast, and prosecute her for libel. Perhaps he never had known her. Here was Margaret, who behaved as if he had not. There the house. Round them were half a dozen gardeners, clearing up after his daughter's wedding. All was so solid and spruce that the past flew up out of sight like a spring-blind, leaving only the last five minutes unrolled.

Glancing at these, he saw that the car would be round during the next five, and plunged into action. Gongs were tapped, orders issued, Margaret was sent to dress, and the housemaid to sweep up the long trickle of grass that she had left across the hall. As is Man to the Universe, so was the mind of Mr Wilcox to the minds of some men—a concentrated light upon a tiny spot, a little Ten Minutes moving self-contained through its appointed years. No pagan he, who lives for the Now, and may be wiser than all philosophers. He lived for the five minutes that have passed, and the five to come; he had the business mind.

How did he stand now, as his motor slipped out of Oniton and breasted the great round hills? Margaret had heard a certain rumour, but was all right. She had forgiven him, God bless her, and he felt the manlier for it. Charles and Evie had not heard it, and never must hear. No more must Paul. Over his children he felt great tenderness, which he did not try to track to a cause; Mrs Wilcox was too far back in his life. He did not connect her with the sudden aching love that he felt for Evie. Poor little Evie! He trusted that Cahill would make her a decent husband.

And Margaret? How did she stand?

She had several minor worries. Clearly her sister had heard something. She dreaded meeting her in town. And she was anxious about Leonard, for whom they certainly were responsible. Nor ought Mrs Bast to starve. But the main situation had not altered. She still loved Henry. His actions, not his disposition, had disappointed her, and she could bear that. And she loved her future home. Standing up in the car, just where she had leapt from it two days before, she gazed back with deep emotion upon Oniton. Besides the Grange and the Castle keep, she could now pick out the church and the black-and-white gables of the George. There was the bridge, and the river nibbling its green peninsula. She could even see the bathing-shed, but while she was looking for Charles's new springboard the forehead of the hill rose up and hid the whole scene.

She never saw it again. Day and night the river flows down into England, day after day the sun retreats into the Welsh mountains, and the tower chimes 'See the Conquering Hero'. But the Wilcoxes have no part in the place, nor in any place. It is not their names that recur in the parish register. It is not their ghosts that sigh among the alders at evening. They have swept into the valley and swept out of it, leaving a little dust and a little money behind.

XXX

TIBBY WAS NOW APPROACHING his last year at Oxford. He had moved out of college, and was contemplating the Universe, or such portions of it as concerned him, from his comfortable lodgings in Long Wall. He was not concerned with much. When a young man is untroubled by passions and sincerely indifferent to public opinion, his outlook is necessarily limited. Tibby neither wished to strengthen the position of the rich nor to improve that of the poor, and so was well content to watch the elms nodding behind the mildly embattled parapets of Magdalen. There are worse lives. Though selfish, he was never cruel; though affected in manner, he never posed. Like Margaret, he disdained the heroic equipment, and it was only after many visits that men discovered Schlegel to possess a character and a brain. He had done well in Mods,[1] much to the surprise of those who attended lectures and took proper exercise, and was now glancing disdainfully at Chinese in case he should some day consent to qualify as a Student Interpreter. To him thus employed Helen entered. A telegram had preceded her.

He noticed, in a distant way, that his sister had altered. As a rule he found her too pronounced, and had never come across this look of appeal, pathetic yet dignified—the look of a sailor who has lost everything at sea.

'I have come from Oniton,' she began. 'There has been a great deal of trouble there.'

'Who's for lunch?' said Tibby, picking up the claret, which was warming in the hearth. Helen sat down submissively at the table. 'Why such an early start?' he asked.

'Sunrise or something—when I could get away.'

'So I surmise. Why?'

'I don't know what's to be done, Tibby. I am very much upset at a piece of news that concerns Meg, and do not want to face her, and I am not going back to Wickham Place. I stopped here to tell you this.'

The landlady came in with the cutlets. Tibby put a marker in the leaves of his Chinese Grammar and helped them. Oxford—the Oxford of the vacation—dreamed and rustled outside, and indoors the little fire was coated with gray where the sunshine touched it. Helen continued her odd story.

'Give Meg my love and say that I want to be alone. I mean to go to Munich or else Bonn.'

'Such a message is easily given,' said her brother.

'As regards Wickham Place and my share of the furniture, you and she are to do exactly as you like. My own feeling is that everything may just as well be sold. What does one want with dusty economic books, which have made the world no better, or with mother's hideous chiffoniers? I have also another commission for you. I want you to deliver a letter.' She got up. 'I haven't written it yet. Why shouldn't I post it, though?' She sat down again. 'My head is rather wretched. I hope that none of your friends are likely to come in.'

Tibby locked the door. His friends often found it in this condition. Then he asked whether anything had gone wrong at Evie's wedding.

'Not there,' said Helen, and burst into tears.

He had known her hysterical—it was one of her aspects with which he had no concern—and yet these tears touched him as something unusual. They were nearer the things that did concern him, such as music. He laid down his knife and looked at her curiously. Then, as she continued to sob, he went on with his lunch.

The time came for the second course, and she was still crying. Apple charlotte was to follow, which spoils by waiting. 'Do you mind Mrs Martlett coming in?' he asked, 'or shall I take it from her at the door?'

'Could I bathe my eyes, Tibby?'

He took her to his bedroom, and introduced the pudding in her absence. Having helped himself, he put it down to warm in the hearth. His hand stretched towards the Grammar, and soon he was turning over the pages, raising his eyebrows scornfully, perhaps at human nature, perhaps at Chinese. To him thus employed Helen returned. She had pulled herself together, but the grave appeal had not vanished from her eyes.

'Now for the explanation,' she said. 'Why didn't I begin with it? I have found out something about Mr Wilcox. He has behaved very wrongly indeed, and ruined two people's lives. It all came on me very suddenly last night; I am very much upset, and I do not know what to do. Mrs Bast—'

'Oh, those people!'

Helen seemed silenced.

'Shall I lock the door again?'

'No, thanks, Tibbikins. You're being very good to me. I want to tell you the story before I go abroad. You must do exactly what you like—treat it as part of the furniture. Meg cannot have heard it yet, I think. But I cannot face her and tell her that the man she is going to marry has misconducted himself. I don't even know whether she ought to be told. Knowing as she does that I dislike him, she will suspect me, and think that I want to ruin her match. I simply don't know what to make of such a thing. I trust your judgement. What would you do?'

'I gather he has had a mistress,' said Tibby.

Helen flushed with shame and anger. 'And ruined two people's lives. And goes about saying that personal actions count for nothing, and there always will be rich and poor. He met her when he was trying to get rich out in Cyprus—I don't wish to make him worse than he is, and no doubt she was ready enough to meet him. But there it is. They met. He goes his way and she goes hers. What do you suppose is the end of such women?'

He conceded that it was a bad business.

‘They end in two ways: either they sink till the lunatic asylums and the workhouses are full of them, and cause Mr Wilcox to write letters to the papers complaining of our national degeneracy, or else they entrap a boy into marriage before it is too late. She—I can’t blame her.’

‘But this isn’t all,’ she continued after a long pause, during which the landlady served them with coffee. ‘I come now to the business that took us to Oniton. We went all three. Acting on Mr Wilcox’s advice, the man throws up a secure situation and takes an insecure one, from which he is dismissed. There are certain excuses, but in the main Mr Wilcox is to blame, as Meg herself admitted. It is only common justice that he should employ the man himself. But he meets the woman, and, like the cur that he is, he refuses, and tries to get rid of them. He makes Meg write. Two notes came from her late that evening—one for me, one for Leonard, dismissing him with barely a reason. I couldn’t understand. Then it comes out that Mrs Bast had spoken to Mr Wilcox on the lawn while we left her to get rooms, and was still speaking about him when Leonard came back to her. This Leonard knew all along. He thought it natural he should be ruined twice. Natural! Could you have contained yourself?’

‘It is certainly a very bad business,’ said Tibby.

His reply seemed to calm his sister. ‘I was afraid that I saw it out of proportion. But you are right outside it, and you must know. In a day or two—or perhaps a week—take whatever steps you think fit. I leave it in your hands.’

She concluded her charge.

‘The facts as they touch Meg are all before you,’ she added; and Tibby sighed and felt it rather hard that, because of his open mind, he should be empanelled to serve as a juror. He had never been in-terested in human beings, for which one must blame him, but he had had rather too much of them at Wickham Place. Just as some people cease to attend when books are mentioned, so Tibby’s attention wandered when ‘personal relations’ came under discussion. Ought Margaret to know what Helen knew the Basts to know? Similar questions had vexed him from infancy, and at Oxford he had learned to say that the importance of human beings has been vastly overrated by specialists. The epigram, with its faint whiff of the ‘eighties, meant nothing. But he might have let it off now if his sister had not been ceaselessly beautiful.

‘You see, Helen—have a cigarette—I don’t see what I’m to do.’

‘Then there’s nothing to be done. I dare say you are right. Let them marry. There remains the question of compensation.’

‘Do you want me to adjudicate that too? Had you not better consult an expert?’

‘This part is in confidence,’ said Helen. ‘It has nothing to do with Meg, and do not mention it to her. The compensation—I do not see who is to pay it if I don’t, and I have already decided on the minimum sum. As soon as possible I am placing it to your account, and when I am in Germany you will pay it over for me. I shall never forget your kindness, Tibbikins, if you do this.’

‘What is the sum?’

‘Five thousand.’

‘Good God alive!’ said Tibby, and went crimson.

‘Now, what is the good of driblets? To go through life having done one thing—to have raised one person from the abyss; not these puny gifts of shillings and blankets—making the gray more gray. No doubt people will think me extraordinary.’

‘I don’t care a damn what people think!’ cried he, heated to unusual manliness of diction. ‘But it’s half what you have.’

‘Not nearly half.’ She spread out her hands over her soiled skirt.

‘I have far too much, and we settled at Chelsea last spring that three hundred a year is necessary to set a man on his feet. What I give will bring in a hundred and fifty between two. It isn’t enough.’

He could not recover. He was not angry or even shocked, and he saw that Helen would still have plenty to live on. But it amazed him to think what haycocks people can make of their lives. His delicate intonations would not work, and he could only blurt out that the five thousand pounds would mean a great deal of bother for him personally.

‘I didn’t expect you to understand me.’

‘I? I understand nobody.’

‘But you’ll do it?’

‘Apparently.’

‘I leave you two commissions, then. The first concerns Mr Wilcox, and you are to use your discretion. The second concerns the money, and is to be mentioned to no one, and carried out literally. You will send a hundred pounds on account tomorrow.’

He walked with her to the station, passing through those streets whose serried beauty never bewildered him and never fatigued. The lovely creature raised domes and spires into the cloudless blue, and only the ganglion of vulgarity round Carfax showed how evanescent was the phantom, how faint its claim to represent England. Helen, rehearsing her commission, noticed nothing; the Basts were on her brain, and she retold the crisis in a meditative way which might have made other men curious. She was seeing whether it would hold. He asked her once why she had taken the Basts right into the heart of Evie’s wedding. She stopped like a frightened animal and said, ‘Does that seem to you so odd?’ Her eyes, the hand laid on the mouth, quite haunted him, until they were absorbed into the figure of St Mary the Virgin, before whom he paused for a moment on the walk home.

It is convenient to follow him in the discharge of his duties. Margaret summoned him the next day. She was

terrified at Helen's flight, and he had to say that she had called in at Oxford. Then she said: 'Did she seem worried at any rumour about Henry?' He answered, 'Yes,' 'I knew it was that!' she exclaimed. 'I'll write to her.' Tibby was relieved.

He then sent the cheque to the address that Helen gave him, and stated that later on he was instructed to forward five thousand pounds. An answer came back, very civil and quiet in tone—such an answer as Tibby himself would have given. The cheque was returned, the legacy refused, the writer being in no need of money. Tibby forwarded this to Helen, adding in the fullness of his heart that Leonard Bast seemed somewhat a monumental person after all. Helen's reply was frantic. He was to take no notice. He was to go down at once and say that she commanded acceptance. He went. A scurf of books and china ornaments awaited him. The Basts had just been evicted for not paying their rent, and had wandered no one knew whither. Helen had begun bungling with her money by this time, and had even sold out her shares in the Nottingham and Derby Railway. For some weeks she did nothing. Then she reinvested, and, owing to the good advice of her stockbrokers, became rather richer than she had been before.

XXXI

HOUSES HAVE THEIR OWN ways of dying, falling as variously as the generations of men, some with a tragic roar, some quietly but to an afterlife in the city of ghosts, while from others—and thus was the death of Wickham Place—the spirit slips before the body perishes. It had decayed in the spring, disintegrating the girls more than they knew, and causing either to accost unfamiliar regions. By September it was a corpse, void of emotion, and scarcely hallowed by the memories of thirty years of happiness. Through its round-topped doorway passed furniture, and pictures, and books, until the last room was gutted and the last van had rumbled away. It stood for a week or two longer, open-eyed, as if astonished at its own emptiness. Then it fell. Navvies came, and spilt it back into the gray. With their muscles and their beery good temper, they were not the worst of undertakers for a house which had always been human, and had not mistaken culture for an end.

The furniture, with a few exceptions, went down into Hertfordshire, Mr Wilcox having most kindly offered Howards End as a warehouse. Mr Bryce had died abroad—an unsatisfactory affair—and as there seemed little guarantee that the rent would be paid regularly he cancelled the agreement, and resumed possession himself. Until he re-let the house, the Schlegels were welcome to stack their furniture in the garage and lower rooms. Margaret demurred, but Tibby accepted the offer gladly; it saved him from coming to any decision about the future. The plate and the more valuable pictures found a safer home in London, but the bulk of the things went country-ways, and were entrusted to the guardianship of Miss Avery.

Shortly before the move, our hero and heroine were married. They have weathered the storm, and may reasonably expect peace. To have no illusions and yet to love—what stronger surety can a woman find? She had seen her husband's past as well as his heart. She knew her own heart with a thoroughness that commonplace people believe impossible. The heart of Mrs Wilcox was alone hidden, and perhaps it is superstitious to speculate on the feelings of the dead. They were married quietly—really quietly, for as the day approached she refused to go through another Oniton. Her brother gave her away, her aunt, who was out of health, presided over a few colourless refreshments. The Wilcoxes were represented by Charles, who witnessed the marriage settlement, and by Mr Cahill. Paul did send a cablegram. In a few minutes, and without the aid of music, the clergyman made them man and wife, and soon the glass shade had fallen that cuts off married couples from the world. She, a monogamist, regretted the cessation of some of life's innocent odours; he, whose instincts were polygamous, felt morally braced by the change, and less liable to the temptations that had assailed him in the past.

They spent their honeymoon near Innsbruck. Henry knew of a reliable hotel there, and Margaret hoped for a meeting with her sister. In this she was disappointed. As they came south, Helen retreated over the Brenner, and wrote an unsatisfactory postcard from the shores of the Lake of Garda, saying that her plans were uncertain and had better be ignored. Evidently she disliked meeting Henry. Two months are surely enough to accustom an outsider to a situation which a wife has accepted in two days, and Margaret had again to regret her sister's lack of self-control. In a long letter she pointed out the need of charity in sexual matters: so little is known about them; it is hard enough for those who are personally touched to judge; then how futile must be the verdict of society. 'I don't say there is no standard, for that would destroy morality; only that there can be no standard until our impulses are classified and better understood.' Helen thanked her for her kind letter—rather a curious reply. She moved south again, and spoke of wintering in Naples.

Mr Wilcox was not sorry that the meeting failed. Helen left him time to grow skin over his wound. There were still moments when it pained him. Had he only known that Margaret was awaiting him—Margaret, so lively and intelligent, and yet so submissive—he would have kept himself worthier of her. Incapable of grouping the past, he confused the episode of Jacky with another episode that had taken place in the days of his bachelorhood. The two made one crop of wild oats, for which he was heartily sorry, and he could not see that those oats are of a darker stock which are rooted in another's dishonour. Unchastity and infidelity were as confused to him as to the Middle

Ages, his only moral teacher. Ruth (poor old Ruth!) did not enter into his calculations at all, for poor old Ruth had never found him out.

His affection for his present wife grew steadily. Her cleverness gave him no trouble, and, indeed, he liked to see her reading poetry or something about social questions; it distinguished her from the wives of other men. He had only to call, and she clapped the book up and was ready to do what he wished. Then they would argue so jollily, and once or twice she had him in quite a tight corner, but as soon as he grew really serious she gave in. Man is for war, woman for the recreation of the warrior, but he does not dislike it if she makes a show of fight. She cannot win in a real battle, having no muscles, only nerves. Nerves make her jump out of a moving motor-car, or refuse to be married fashionably. The warrior may well allow her to triumph on such occasions; they move not the imperishable plinth of things that touch his peace.

Margaret had a bad attack of these nerves during the honeymoon. He told her—casually, as was his habit—that Oniton Grange was let. She showed her annoyance, and asked rather crossly why she had not been consulted.

'I didn't want to bother you,' he replied. 'Besides, I have only heard for certain this morning.'

'Where are we to live?' said Margaret, trying to laugh. 'I loved the place extraordinarily. Don't you believe in having a permanent home, Henry?'

He assured her that she misunderstood him. It is home life that distinguishes us from the foreigner. But he did not believe in a damp home.

'This is news. I never heard till this minute that Oniton was damp.'

'My dear girl!'—he flung out his hand—'Have you eyes? Have you a skin? How could it be anything but damp in such a situation? In the first place, the Grange is on clay, and built where the castle moat must have been; then there's that detestable little river, steaming all night like a kettle. Feel the cellar walls; look up under the eaves. Ask Sir James or anyone. Those Shropshire valleys are notorious. The only possible place for a house in Shropshire is on a hill; but, for my part, I think the county is too far from London, and the scenery nothing special.'

Margaret could not resist saying, 'Why did you go there, then?'

'I—believe—' He drew his head back and grew rather angry. 'Why have we come to the Tyrol, if it comes to that? One might go on asking such questions indefinitely.'

One might; but he was only gaining time for a plausible answer. Out it came, and he believed it as soon as it was spoken.

'The truth is, I took Oniton on account of Evie. Don't let this go any further.'

'Certainly not.'

'I shouldn't like her to know that she nearly let me in for a very bad bargain. No sooner did I sign the agreement than she got engaged. Poor little girl! She was so keen on it all, and wouldn't even wait to make proper inquiries about the shooting. Afraid it would get snapped up—just like all of your sex. Well, no harm's done. She has had her country wedding, and I've got rid of my house to some fellows who are starting a preparatory school.'

'Where shall we live, then, Henry? I should enjoy living somewhere.'

'I have not yet decided. What about Norfolk?'

Margaret was silent. Marriage had not saved her from the sense of flux. London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task!

'It is now what?' continued Henry. 'Nearly October. Let us camp for the winter in Ducie Street, and look out for something in the spring.'

'If possible, something permanent. I can't be as young as I was, for these alterations don't suit me.'

'But, my dear, which would you rather have—alterations or rheumatism?'

'I see your point,' said Margaret, getting up. 'If Oniton is really damp, it is impossible, and must be inhabited by little boys. Only, in the spring, let us look before we leap. I will take warning by Evie, and not hurry you. Remember that you have a free hand this time. These endless moves must be bad for the furniture, and are certainly expensive.'

'What a practical little woman it is! What's it been reading? Theo—theo—how much?'

'Theosophy.'

So Ducie Street was her first fate—a pleasant enough fate. The house, being only a little larger than Wickham Place, trained her for the immense establishment that was promised in the spring. They were frequently away, but at home life ran fairly regularly. In the morning Henry went to the business, and his sandwich—a relic this of some prehistoric craving—was always cut by her own hand. He did not rely upon the sandwich for lunch, but liked to have it by him in case he grew hungry at eleven. When he had gone, there was the house to look after, and the servants to humanize, and several kettles of Helen's to keep on the boil. Her conscience pricked her a little about the Basts; she was not sorry to have lost sight of them. No doubt Leonard was worth helping, but being Henry's wife she preferred to help someone else. As for theatres and discussion societies, they attracted her less and less. She began to 'miss' new movements, and to spend her spare time rereading or thinking, rather to the concern of her Chelsea friends. They attributed the change to her marriage, and perhaps some deep instinct did warn her not to travel further from her husband than was inevitable. Yet the main cause lay deeper still; she had outgrown stimulants, and was passing from words to things. It was doubtless a pity not to keep up with Wedekind

or John,[1] but some closing of the gates is inevitable after thirty, if the mind itself is to become a creative power.

XXXII

SHE WAS LOOKING AT plans one day in the following spring—they had finally decided to go down into Sussex and build—when Mrs Charles Wilcox was announced.

'Have you heard the news?' Dolly cried, as soon as she entered the room. 'Charles is so ang—I mean he is sure you know about it, or, rather, that you don't know.'

'Why, Dolly!' said Margaret, placidly kissing her. 'Here's a surprise! How are the boys and the baby?'

Boys and the baby were well, and in describing a great row that there had been at the Hilton Tennis Club Dolly forgot her news. The wrong people had tried to get in. The rector, as representing the older inhabitants, had said—Charles had said—the tax-collector had said—Charles had regretted not saying—and she closed the description with, 'But lucky you, with four courts of your own at Midhurst.'

'It will be very jolly,' replied Margaret.

'Are those the plans? Does it matter me seeing them?'

'Of course not.'

'Charles has never seen the plans.'

'They have only just arrived. Here is the ground floor—no, that's rather difficult. Try the elevation. We are to have a good many gables and a picturesque skyline.'

'What makes it smell so funny?' said Dolly, after a moment's inspection. She was incapable of understanding plans or maps.

'I suppose the paper.'

'And *which* way up is it?'

'Just the ordinary way up. That's the skyline, and the part that smells strongest is the sky.'

'Well, ask me another. Margaret—oh what was I going to say? How's Helen?'

'Quite well.'

'Is she never coming back to England? Everyone thinks it's awfully odd she doesn't.'

'So it is,' said Margaret, trying to conceal her vexation. She was getting rather sore on this point. 'Helen is odd, awfully. She has now been away eight months.'

'But hasn't she any address?'

'A poste restante somewhere in Bavaria is her address. Do write her a line. I will look it up for you.'

'No, don't bother. That's eight months she has been away, surely?'

'Exactly. She left just after Evie's wedding. It would be eight months.'

'Just when baby was born, then?'

'Just so.'

Dolly sighed, and stared enviously round the drawing-room. She was beginning to lose her brightness and good looks. The Charleses were not well off, for Mr Wilcox, having brought up his children with expensive tastes, believed in letting them shift for themselves. After all, he had not treated them generously. Yet another baby was expected, she told Margaret, and they would have to give up the motor. Margaret sympathized, but in a formal fashion, and Dolly little imagined that the stepmother was urging Mr Wilcox to make them a more liberal allowance. She sighed again, and at last the particular grievance was remembered. 'Oh yes,' she cried, 'that is it: Miss Avery has been unpacking your packing-cases.'

'Why has she done that? How unnecessary!'

'Ask another. I suppose you ordered her to.'

'I gave no such orders. Perhaps she was airing the things. She did undertake to light an occasional fire.'

'It was far more than an air,' said Dolly solemnly. 'The floor sounds covered with books. Charles sent me to know what is to be done, for he feels certain you don't know.'

'Books!' cried Margaret, moved by the holy word. 'Dolly, are you serious? Has she been touching our books?'

'Hasn't she, though! What used to be the hall's full of them. Charles thought for certain you knew of it.'

'I am very much obliged to you, Dolly. What can have come over Miss Avery? I must go down about it at once. Some of the books are my brother's, and are quite valuable. She had no right to open any of the cases.'

'I say she's dotty. She was the one that never got married, you know. Oh, I say, perhaps she thinks your books are wedding presents to herself. Old maids are taken that way sometimes. Miss Avery hates us all like poison ever since her frightful dust-up with Evie.'

'I hadn't heard of that,' said Margaret. A visit from Dolly had its compensations.

'Didn't you know she gave Evie a present last August, and Evie returned it, and then—oh, goloshes! You never read such a letter as Miss Avery wrote.'

'But it was wrong of Evie to return it. It wasn't like her to do such a heartless thing.'

'But the present was so expensive.'

‘Why does that make any difference, Dolly?’

‘Still, when it costs over five pounds—I didn’t see it, but it was a lovely enamel pendant from a Bond Street shop. You can’t very well accept that kind of thing from a farm-woman. Now, can you?’

‘You accepted a present from Miss Avery when you were married.’

‘Oh, mine was old earthenware stuff—not worth a half-penny. Evie’s was quite different. You’d have to ask anyone to the wedding who gave you a pendant like that. Uncle Percy and Albert and father and Charles all said it was quite impossible, and when four men agree what is a girl to do? Evie didn’t want to upset the old thing, so thought a sort of joking letter best, and returned the pendant straight to the shop to save Miss Avery trouble.’

‘But Miss Avery said—’

Dolly’s eyes grew round. ‘It was a perfectly awful letter. Charles said it was the letter of a madman. In the end she had the pendant back again from the shop and threw it into the duck-pond.’

‘Did she give any reasons?’

‘We think she meant to be invited to Oniton, and so climb into society.’

‘She’s rather old for that,’ said Margaret pensively. ‘May not she have given the present to Evie in remembrance of her mother?’

‘That’s a notion. Give everyone their due, eh? Well, I suppose I ought to be toddling. Come along, Mr Muff—you want a new coat, but I don’t know who’ll give it you, I’m sure;’ and addressing her apparel with mournful humour Dolly moved from the room.

Margaret followed her to ask whether Henry knew about Miss Avery’s rudeness.

‘Oh yes.’

‘I wonder, then, why he let me ask her to look after the house.’

‘But she’s only a farm-woman,’ said Dolly, and her explanation proved correct. Henry only censured the lower classes when it suited him. He bore with Miss Avery as with Crane—because he could get good value out of them. ‘I have patience with a man who knows his job,’ he would say, really having patience with the job, and not the man. Paradoxical as it may sound, he had something of the artist about him: he would pass over an insult to his daughter sooner than lose a good charwoman for his wife.

Margaret judged it better to settle the little trouble herself. Parties were evidently ruffled. With Henry’s permission, she wrote a pleasant note to Miss Avery, asking her to leave the cases untouched. Then, at the first convenient opportunity, she went down herself, intending to repack her belongings and store them properly in the local warehouse; the plan had been amateurish and a failure. Tibby promised to accompany her, but at the last moment begged to be excused. So, for the second time in her life, she entered the house alone.

XXXIII

THE DAY OF HER visit was exquisite, and the last of unclouded happiness that she was to have for many months. Her anxiety about Helen’s extraordinary absence was still dormant, and as for a possible brush with Miss Avery—that only gave zest to the expedition. She had also eluded Dolly’s invitation to luncheon. Walking straight up from the station, she crossed the village green and entered the long chestnut avenue that connects it with the church. The church itself stood in the village once. But it there attracted so many worshippers that the Devil, in a pet, snatched it from its foundations, and poised it on an inconvenient knoll, three-quarters of a mile away. If this story is true, the chestnut avenue must have been planted by the angels. No more tempting approach could be imagined for the lukewarm Christian, and if he still finds the walk too long the Devil is defeated all the same, Science having built Holy Trinity, a Chapel of Ease, near the Charleses, and roofed it with tin.

Up the avenue Margaret strolled slowly, stopping to watch the sky that gleamed through the upper branches of the chestnuts, or to finger the little horseshoes on the lower branches. Why has not England a great mythology? Our folklore has never advanced beyond daintiness, and the greater melodies about our countryside have all issued through the pipes of Greece. Deep and true as the native imagination can be, it seems to have failed here. It has stopped with the witches and the fairies. It cannot vivify one fraction of a summer field, or give names to half a dozen stars. England still waits for the supreme moment of her literature—for the great poet who shall voice her, or, better still, for the thousand little poets whose voices shall pass into our common talk.

At the church the scenery changed. The chestnut avenue opened into a road, smooth but narrow, which led into the untouched country. She followed it for over a mile. Its little hesitations pleased her. Having no urgent destiny, it strolled downhill or up as it wished, taking no trouble about the gradients, nor about the view, which nevertheless expanded. The great estates that throttle the south of Hertfordshire were less obtrusive here, and the appearance of the land was neither aristocratic nor suburban. To define it was difficult, but Margaret knew what it was not: it was not snobbish. Though its contours were slight, there was a touch of freedom in their sweep to which Surrey will never attain, and the distant brow of the Chilterns towered like a mountain. ‘Left to itself,’ was Margaret’s opinion, ‘this county would vote Liberal.’ The comradeship, not passionate, that is our highest gift as a nation was promised by it, as by the low brick farm where she called for the key.

But the inside of the farm was disappointing. A most finished young person received her. ‘Yes, Mrs Wilcox; no, Mrs Wilcox; oh yes, Mrs Wilcox, Auntie received your letter quite duly. Auntie has gone up to your little place at the present moment. Shall I send the servant to direct you?’ Followed by: ‘Of course, Auntie does not *generally* look after your place; she only does it to oblige a neighbour as something exceptional. It gives her something to do. She spends quite a lot of her time there. My husband says to me sometimes, “Where’s Auntie?” I say: “Need you ask? She’s at Howards End.” Yes, Mrs Wilcox. Mrs Wilcox, could I prevail upon you to accept a piece of cake? Not if I cut it for you?’

Margaret refused the cake, but unfortunately this acquired her gentility in the eyes of Miss Avery’s niece.

‘I cannot let you go on alone. Now don’t. You really mustn’t. I will direct you myself if it comes to that. I must get my hat. Now’—roguishly—’Mrs Wilcox, don’t you move while I’m gone.’

Stunned, Margaret did not move from the best parlour, over which the touch of *art nouveau* had fallen. But the other rooms looked in keeping, though they conveyed the peculiar sadness of a rural interior. Here had lived an elder race, to which we look back with disquietude. The country, which we visit at week-ends, was really a home to it, and the graver sides of life, the deaths, the partings, the yearnings for love, have their deepest expression in the heart of the fields. All was not sadness. The sun was shining without. The thrush sang his two syllables on the budding guelder rose. Some children were playing uproariously in heaps of golden straw. It was the presence of sadness at all that surprised Margaret, and ended by giving her a feeling of completeness. In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers. But her thoughts were interrupted by the return of Miss Avery’s niece, and were so tranquillizing that she suffered the interruption gladly.

It was quicker to go out by the back door, and, after due explanations, they went out by it. The niece was now mortified by innumerable chickens, who rushed up to her feet for food, and by a shameless and maternal sow. She did not know what animals were coming to. But her gentility withered at the touch of the sweet air. The wind was rising, scattering the straw and ruffling the tails of the ducks as they floated in families over Evie’s pendant. One of those delicious gales of spring, in which leaves still in bud seem to rustle, swept over the land and then fell silent. ‘Georgie,’ sang the thrush. ‘Cuckoo,’ came furtively from the cliff of pine trees. ‘Georgie, pretty Georgie,’ and the other birds joined in with nonsense. The hedge was a half-painted picture which would be finished in a few days. Celandines grew on its banks, lords-and-ladies and primroses in the defended hollows; the wild rose bushes, still bearing their withered hips, showed also the promise of blossom. Spring had come, clad in no classical garb, yet fairer than all springs; fairer even than she who walks through the myrtles of Tuscany with the graces before her and the zephyr behind.[1]

The two women walked up the lane full of outward civility. But Margaret was thinking how difficult it was to be earnest about furniture on such a day, and the niece was thinking about hats. Thus engaged, they reached Howards End. Petulant cries of ‘Auntie!’ severed the air. There was no reply, and the front door was locked.

‘Are you sure that Miss Avery is up here?’ asked Margaret.

‘Oh, yes, Mrs Wilcox, quite sure. She is here daily.’

Margaret tried to look in through the dining-room window, but the curtain inside was drawn tightly. So with the drawing-room and the hall. The appearance of these curtains was familiar, yet she did not remember them being there on her other visit; her impression was that Mr Bryce had taken everything away. They tried the back. Here again they received no answer, and could see nothing; the kitchen window was fitted with a blind, while the pantry and scullery had pieces of wood propped up against them, which looked ominously like the lids of packing-cases. Margaret thought of her books, and she lifted up her voice also. At the first cry she succeeded.

‘Well, well!’ replied someone inside the house. ‘If it isn’t Mrs Wilcox come at last!’

‘Have you got the key, Auntie?’

‘Madge, go away,’ said Miss Avery, still invisible.

‘Auntie, it’s Mrs Wilcox—’

Margaret supported her. ‘Your niece and I have come together—’

‘Madge, go away. This is no moment for your hat.’

The poor woman went red. ‘Auntie gets more eccentric lately,’ she said nervously.

‘Miss Avery!’ called Margaret. ‘I have come about the furniture. Could you kindly let me in?’

‘Yes, Mrs Wilcox,’ said the voice, ‘of course.’ But after that came silence. They called again without response. They walked round the house disconsolately.

‘I hope Miss Avery is not ill,’ hazarded Margaret.

‘Well, if you’ll excuse me,’ said Madge, ‘perhaps I ought to be leaving you now. The servants need seeing to at the farm. Auntie is so odd at times.’ Gathering up her elegancies, she retired defeated, and, as if her departure had loosed a spring, the front door opened at once.

Miss Avery said, ‘Well, come right in, Mrs Wilcox!’ quite pleasantly and calmly.

‘Thank you so much,’ began Margaret, but broke off at the sight of an umbrella-stand. It was her own.

‘Come right into the hall first,’ said Miss Avery. She drew the curtain, and Margaret uttered a cry of despair. For an appalling thing had happened. The hall was fitted up with the contents of the library from Wickham Place. The carpet had been laid, the big work-table drawn up near the window; the bookcases filled the wall opposite the fireplace, and her father’s sword—this is what bewildered her particularly—had been drawn from its scabbard and hung naked amongst the sober volumes. Miss Avery must have worked for days.

‘I’m afraid this isn’t what we meant,’ she began. ‘Mr Wilcox and I never intended the cases to be touched. For instance, these books are my brother’s. We are storing them for him and for my sister, who is abroad. When you kindly undertook to look after things, we never expected you to do so much.’

‘The house has been empty long enough,’ said the old woman.

Margaret refused to argue. ‘I dare say we didn’t explain,’ she said civilly. ‘It has been a mistake, and very likely our mistake.’

‘Mrs Wilcox, it has been mistake upon mistake for fifty years. The house is Mrs Wilcox’s, and she would not desire it to stand empty any longer.’

To help the poor decaying brain, Margaret said:

‘Yes, Mrs Wilcox’s house, the mother of Mr Charles.’

‘Mistake upon mistake,’ said Miss Avery. ‘Mistake upon mistake.’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ said Margaret, sitting down in one of her own chairs. ‘I really don’t know what’s to be done.’ She could not help laughing.

The other said: ‘Yes, it should be a merry house enough.’

‘I don’t know—I dare say. Well, thank you very much, Miss Avery. Yes, that’s all right. Delightful.’

‘There is still the parlour.’ She went through the door opposite and drew a curtain. Light flooded the drawing-room and the drawing-room furniture from Wickham Place. ‘And the dining-room.’ More curtains were drawn, more windows were flung open to the spring. ‘Then through here—’ Miss Avery continued passing and repassing through the hall. Her voice was lost, but Margaret heard her pulling up the kitchen blind. ‘I’ve not finished here yet,’ she announced, returning. ‘There’s still a deal to do. The farm-lads will carry your great wardrobes upstairs, for there is no need to go into expense at Hilton.’

‘It is all a mistake,’ repeated Margaret, feeling that she must put her foot down. ‘A misunderstanding. Mr Wilcox and I are not going to live at Howards End.’

‘Oh, indeed. On account of his hay fever?’

‘We have settled to build a new home for ourselves in Sussex, and part of this furniture—my part—will go down there presently.’ She looked at Miss Avery intently, trying to understand the kink in her brain. Here was no maundering old woman. Her wrinkles were shrewd and humorous. She looked capable of scathing wit and also of high but unostentatious nobility.

‘You think that you won’t come back to live here, Mrs Wilcox, but you will.’

‘That remains to be seen,’ said Margaret, smiling. ‘We have no intention of doing so for the present. We happen to need a much larger house. Circumstances oblige us to give big parties. Of course, some day—one never knows, does one?’

Miss Avery retorted: ‘Some day! Tcha! Tcha! Don’t talk about some day. You are living here now.’

‘Am I?’

‘You are living here, and have been for the last ten minutes, if you ask me.’

It was a senseless remark, but with a queer feeling of disloyalty Margaret rose from her chair. She felt that Henry had been obscurely censured. They went into the dining-room, where the sunlight poured in upon her mother’s chiffonier, and upstairs, where many an old god peeped from a new niche. The furniture fitted extraordinarily well. In the central room—over the hall, the room that Helen had slept in four years ago—Miss Avery had placed Tibby’s old bassinet.

‘The nursery,’ she said.

Margaret turned away without speaking.

At last everything was seen. The kitchen and lobby were still stacked with furniture and straw, but, as far as she could make out, nothing had been broken or scratched. A pathetic display of ingenuity! Then they took a friendly stroll in the garden. It had gone wild since her last visit. The gravel sweep was weedy, and grass had sprung up at the very jaws of the garage. And Evie’s rockery was only bumps. Perhaps Evie was responsible for Miss Avery’s odd-ness. But Margaret suspected that the cause lay deeper and that the girl’s silly letter had but loosed the irritation of years.

‘It’s a beautiful meadow,’ she remarked. It was one of those open-air drawing-rooms that have been formed hundreds of years ago, out of the smaller fields. So the boundary hedge zigzagged down the hill at right angles, and at the bottom there was a little green annex—a sort of powder-closet for the cows.

‘Yes, the maidy’s[2] well enough,’ said Miss Avery, for those, that is, who don’t suffer from sneezing. And she cackled maliciously, ‘I’ve seen Charlie Wilcox go out to my lads in hay time—oh, they ought to do this—they mustn’t do that—he’d learn them to be lads. And just then the tickling took him. He has it from his father, with other things. There’s not one Wilcox that can stand up against a field in June—I laughed fit to burst while he was courting Ruth.’

‘My brother gets hay fever too,’ said Margaret.

‘This house lies too much on the land for them. Naturally, they were glad enough to slip in at first. But Wilcoxes are better than nothing, as I see you’ve found.’

Margaret laughed.

‘They keep a place going, don’t they? Yes, it is just that.’

‘They keep England going, it is my opinion.’

But Miss Avery upset her by replying: ‘Ay, they breed like rabbits. Well, well, it’s a funny world. But He who

made it knows what He wants in it, I suppose. If Mrs Charlie is expecting her fourth, it isn't for us to repine.'

'They breed and they also work,' said Margaret, conscious of some invitation to disloyalty, which was echoed by the very breeze and by the songs of the birds. 'It certainly is a funny world, but so long as men like my husband and his sons govern it I think it'll never be a bad one—never really bad.'

'No, better'n nothing,' said Miss Avery, and turned to the wychelm.

On their way back to the farm she spoke of her old friend much more clearly than before. In the house Margaret had wondered whether she quite distinguished the first wife from the second. Now she said: 'I never saw much of Ruth after her grandmother died, but we stayed civil. It was a very civil family. Old Mrs Howard never spoke against anybody, nor let anyone be turned away without food. Then it was never "Trespassers will be prosecuted" in their land, but would people please not come in? Mrs Howard was never created to run a farm.'

'Had they no men to help them?' Margaret asked.

Miss Avery replied: 'Things went on until there were no men.'

'Until Mr Wilcox came along,' corrected Margaret, anxious that her husband should receive his dues.

'I suppose so; but Ruth should have married a—no disrespect to you to say this, for I take it you were intended to get Wilcox anyway, whether she got him first or no.'

'Whom should she have married?'

'A soldier!' exclaimed the old woman. 'Some real soldier.'

Margaret was silent. It was a criticism of Henry's character far more trenchant than any of her own. She felt dissatisfied.

'But that's all over,' she went on. 'A better time is coming now, though you've kept me long enough waiting. In a couple of weeks I'll see your lights shining through the hedge of an evening. Have you ordered in coals?'

'We are not coming,' said Margaret firmly. She respected Miss Avery too much to humour her. 'No. Not coming. Never coming. It has all been a mistake. The furniture must be repacked at once, and I am very sorry, but I am making other arrangements, and must ask you to give me the keys.'

'Certainly, Mrs Wilcox,' said Miss Avery, and resigned her duties with a smile.

Relieved at this conclusion, and having sent her compliments to Madge, Margaret walked back to the station. She had intended to go to the furniture warehouse and give directions for removal, but the muddle had turned out more extensive than she expected, so she decided to consult Henry. It was as well that she did this. He was strongly against employing the local man whom he had previously recommended, and advised her to store in London after all.

But before this could be done an unexpected trouble fell upon her.

XXXIV

IT WAS NOT UNEXPECTED entirely. Aunt Juley's health had been bad all the winter. She had had a long series of colds and coughs, and had been too busy to get rid of them. She had scarcely promised her niece 'to really take my tiresome chest in hand' when she caught a chill and developed acute pneumonia. Margaret and Tibby went down to Swanage. Helen was telegraphed for, and the spring party that after all gathered in that hospitable house had all the pathos of fair memories. On a perfect day, when the sky seemed blue porcelain, and the waves of the discreet little bay beat gentlest of tattoos upon the sand, Margaret hurried up through the rhododendrons, confronted again by the senselessness of Death. One death may explain itself, but it throws no light upon another; the groping inquiry must begin anew. Preachers or scientists may generalize, but we know that no generality is possible about those whom we love; not one heaven awaits them, not even one oblivion. Aunt Juley, incapable of tragedy, slipped out of life with odd little laughs and apologies for having stopped in it so long. She was very weak; she could not rise to the occasion, or realize the great mystery which all agree must await her; it only seemed to her that she was quite done up—more done up than ever before; that she saw and heard and felt less every moment; and that, unless something changed, she would soon feel nothing. Her spare strength she devoted to plans: could not Margaret take some steamer expeditions? Were mackerel cooked as Tibby liked them? She worried herself about Helen's absence, and also that she should be the cause of Helen's return. The nurses seemed to think such interests quite natural, and perhaps hers was an average approach to the Great Gate. But Margaret saw Death stripped of any false romance; whatever the idea of Death may contain, the process can be trivial and hideous.

'Important—Margaret dear, take the Lulworth when Helen comes.'

'Helen won't be able to stop, Aunt Juley. She has telegraphed that she can only get away just to see you. She must go back to Germany as soon as you are well.'

'How very odd of Helen! Mr Wilcox—'

'Yes, dear?'

'Can he spare you?'

Henry wished her to come, and had been very kind. Yet again Margaret said so.

Mrs Munt did not die. Quite outside her will, a more dignified power took hold of her and checked her on the

downward slope. She returned, without emotion, as fidgety as ever. On the fourth day she was out of danger.

'Margaret—important,' it went on: 'I should like you to have some companion to take walks with. Do try Miss Conder.'

'I have been a little walk with Miss Conder.'

'But she is not really interesting. If only you had Helen.'

'I have Tibby, Aunt Juley.'

'No, but he has to do his Chinese. Some real companion is what you need. Really, Helen is odd.'

'Helen is odd, very,' agreed Margaret.

'Not content with going abroad, why does she want to go back there at once?'

'No doubt she will change her mind when she sees us. She has not the least balance.'

That was the stock criticism about Helen, but Margaret's voice trembled as she made it. By now she was deeply pained at her sister's behaviour. It may be unbalanced to fly out of England, but to stop away eight months argues that the heart is awry as well as the head. A sick-bed could recall Helen, but she was deaf to more human calls; after a glimpse at her aunt, she would retire into her nebulous life behind some poste restante. She scarcely existed; her letters had become dull and infrequent; she had no wants and no curiosity. And it was all put down to poor Henry's account! Henry, long pardoned by his wife, was still too infamous to be greeted by his sister-in-law. It was morbid, and, to her alarm, Margaret fancied that she could trace the growth of morbidity back in Helen's life for nearly four years. The flight from Oniton; the unbalanced patronage of the Basts; the explosion of grief up on the downs—all connected with Paul, an insignificant boy whose lips had kissed hers for a fraction of time. Margaret and Mrs Wilcox had feared that they might kiss again. Foolishly: the real danger was reaction. Reaction against the Wilcoxes had eaten into her life until she was scarcely sane. At twenty-five she had an idée fixe. What hope was there for her as an old woman?

The more Margaret thought about it the more alarmed she became. For many months she had put the subject away, but it was too big to be slighted now. There was almost a taint of madness. Were all Helen's actions to be governed by a tiny mishap, such as may happen to any young man or woman? Can human nature be constructed on lines so insignificant? The blundering little encounter at Howards End was vital. It propagated itself where graver intercourse lay barren; it was stronger than sisterly intimacy, stronger than reason or books. In one of her moods Helen had confessed that she still 'enjoyed' it in a certain sense. Paul had faded, but the magic of his caress endured. And where there is enjoyment of the past there may also be reaction—propagation at both ends.

Well, it is odd and sad that our minds should be such seed-beds, and we without power to choose the seed. But man is an odd, sad creature as yet, intent on pilfering the earth, and heedless of the growths within himself. He cannot be bored about psychology. He leaves it to the specialist, which is as if he should leave his dinner to be eaten by a steam-engine. He cannot be bothered to digest his own soul. Margaret and Helen have been more patient, and it is suggested that Margaret has succeeded—so far as success is yet possible. She does understand herself, she has some rudimentary control over her own growth. Whether Helen has succeeded one cannot say.

The day that Mrs Munt rallied Helen's letter arrived. She had posted it at Munich, and would be in London herself on the morrow. It was a disquieting letter, though the opening was affectionate and sane.

Dearest Meg,

Give Helen's love to Aunt Juley. Tell her that I love and have loved her ever since I can remember. I shall be in London Thursday.

My address will be care of the bankers. I have not yet settled on a hotel, so write or wire to me there and give me detailed news. If Aunt Juley is much better, or if, for a terrible reason, it would be no good my coming down to Swanage, you must not think it odd if I do not come. I have all sorts of plans in my head. I am living abroad at present, and want to get back as quickly as possible. Will you please tell me where our furniture is. I should like to take out one or two books; the rest are for you.

Forgive me, dearest Meg. This must read like rather a tiresome letter, but all letters are from your loving

Helen.

It was a tiresome letter, for it tempted Margaret to tell a lie. If she wrote that Aunt Juley was still in danger her sister would come. Unhealthiness is contagious. We cannot be in contact with those who are in a morbid state without ourselves deteriorating. To 'act for the best' might do Helen good, but would do herself harm, and, at the risk of disaster, she kept her colours flying a little longer. She replied that their aunt was much better, and awaited developments.

Tibby approved of her reply. Mellowing rapidly, he was a pleas-anter companion than before. Oxford had done much for him. He had lost his peevishness, and could hide his indifference to people and his interest in food. But he had not grown more human. The years between eighteen and twenty-two, so magical for most, were leading him gently from boyhood to middle age. He had never known young-manliness, that quality which warms the heart till death, and gives Mr Wilcox an imperishable charm. He was frigid—through no fault of his own, and without cruelty. He thought Helen wrong, and Margaret right, but this family trouble was for him what a scene behind footlights is for most people. He had only one suggestion to make, and that was characteristic.

'Why don't you tell Mr Wilcox?'

‘About Helen?’

‘Perhaps he has come across that sort of thing.’

‘He would do all he could, but—’

‘Oh, you know best. But he is practical.’

It was the student’s belief in experts. Margaret demurred for one or two reasons. Presently Helen’s answer came. She sent a telegram requesting the address of the furniture, as she would now return at once. Margaret replied, ‘Certainly not; meet me at the bankers at four.’ She and Tibby went up to London. Helen was not at the bankers, and they were refused her address. Helen had passed into chaos.

Margaret put her arm round her brother. He was all that she had left, and never had he seemed more unsubstantial.

‘Tibby love, what next?’

He replied: ‘It is extraordinary.’

‘Dear, your judgement’s often clearer than mine. Have you any notion what’s at the back?’

‘None, unless it’s something mental.’

‘Oh—that!’ said Margaret. ‘Quite impossible.’ But the suggestion had been uttered, and in a few minutes she took it up herself. Nothing else explained. And London agreed with Tibby. The mask fell off the city, and she saw it for what it really is—a caricature of infinity. The familiar barriers, the streets along which she moved, the houses between which she had made her little journeys for so many years, became negligible suddenly. Helen seemed one with the grimy trees and the traffic and the slowly flowering slabs of mud. She had accomplished a hideous act of renunciation and returned to the One. Margaret’s own faith held firm. She knew the human soul will be merged, if it be merged at all, with the stars and the sea. Yet she felt that her sister had been going amiss for many years. It was symbolic the catastrophe should come now, on a London afternoon, while rain fell slowly.

Henry was the only hope. Henry was definite. He might know of some paths in the chaos that were hidden from them, and she determined to take Tibby’s advice and lay the whole matter in his hands. They must call at his office. He could not well make it worse. She went for a few moments into St Paul’s, whose dome stands out of the welter so bravely, as if preaching the gospel of form. But, within, St Paul’s is as its surroundings—echoes and whispers, inaudible songs, invisible mosaics, wet footmarks crossing and recrossing the floor. *Si monumentum requiris, circum-spice*:[1] it points us back to London. There was no hope of Helen here.

Henry was unsatisfactory at first. That she had expected. He was overjoyed to see her back from Swanage, and slow to admit the growth of a new trouble. When they told him of their search, he only chaffed Tibby and the Schlegels generally, and declared that it was ‘just like Helen’ to lead her relatives a dance.

‘That is what we all say,’ replied Margaret. ‘But why *should* it be just like Helen? Why should she be allowed to be so queer, and to grow queerer?’

‘Don’t ask me. I’m a plain man of business. I live and let live. My advice to you both is, don’t worry. Margaret, you’ve got black marks again under your eyes. You know that’s strictly forbidden. First your aunt—then your sister. No, we aren’t going to have it. Are we, Theobald?’ He rang the bell. ‘I’ll give you some tea, and then you go straight to Ducie Street. I can’t have my girl looking as old as her husband.’

‘All the same, you have not quite seen our point,’ said Tibby.

Mr Wilcox, who was in good spirits, retorted: ‘I don’t suppose I ever shall.’ He leant back, laughing at the gifted but ridiculous family, while the fire flickered over the map of Africa. Margaret motioned to her brother to go on. Rather diffident, he obeyed her.

‘Margaret’s point is this,’ he said. ‘Our sister may be mad.’

Charles, who was working in the inner room, looked round.

‘Come in, Charles,’ said Margaret kindly. ‘Could you help us at all? We are again in trouble.’

‘I’m afraid I cannot. What are the facts? We are all mad more or less, you know, in these days.’

‘The facts are as follows,’ replied Tibby, who had at times a pedantic lucidity. ‘The facts are that she has been in England for three days and will not see us. She has forbidden the bankers to give us her address. She refuses to answer questions. Margaret finds her letters colourless. There are other facts, but these are the most striking.’

‘She has never behaved like this before, then?’ asked Henry.

‘Of course not!’ said his wife, with a frown.

‘Well, my dear, how am I to know?’

A senseless spasm of annoyance came over her. ‘You know quite well that Helen never sins against affection,’ she said. ‘You must have noticed that much in her, surely.’

‘Oh yes; she and I have always hit it off together.’

‘No, Henry—can’t you see?—I don’t mean that.’

She recovered herself, but not before Charles had observed her. Stupid and attentive, he was watching the scene.

‘I was meaning that when she was eccentric in the past one could trace it back to the heart in the long run. She behaved oddly because she cared for someone, or wanted to help them. There’s no possible excuse for her now. She is grieving us deeply, and that is why I am sure that she is not well. “Mad” is too terrible a word, but she is not well. I shall never believe it. I shouldn’t discuss my sister with you if I thought she was well—trouble you about her, I mean.’

Henry began to grow serious. Ill-health was to him something perfectly definite. Generally well himself, he could not realize that we sink to it by slow gradations. The sick had no rights; they were outside the pale; one

could lie to them remorselessly. When his first wife was seized, he had promised to take her down into Hertfordshire, but meanwhile arranged with a nursing-home instead. Helen, too, was ill. And the plan that he sketched out for her capture, clever and well-meaning as it was, drew its ethics from the wolf-pack.

'You want to get hold of her?' he said. 'That's the problem, isn't it? She has got to see a doctor.'

'For all I know she has seen one already.'

'Yes, yes; don't interrupt.' He rose to his feet and thought intently. The genial, tentative host disappeared, and they saw instead the man who had carved money out of Greece and Africa, and bought forests from the natives for a few bottles of gin. 'I've got it,' he said at last. 'It's perfectly easy. Leave it to me. We'll send her down to Howards End.'

'How will you do that?'

'After her books. Tell her that she must unpack them herself. Then you can meet her there.'

'But, Henry, that's just what she won't let me do. It's part of her—whatever it is—never to see me.'

'Of course you won't tell her you're going. When she is there, looking at the cases, you'll just stroll in. If nothing is wrong with her, so much the better. But there'll be the motor round the corner, and we can run her up to a specialist in no time.'

Margaret shook her head. 'It's quite impossible.'

'Why?'

'It doesn't seem impossible to me,' said Tibby; 'it is surely a very tippy plan.'

'It is impossible, because—' She looked at her husband sadly. 'It's not the particular language that Helen and I talk, if you see my meaning. It would do splendidly for other people, whom I don't blame.'

'But Helen doesn't talk,' said Tibby. 'That's our whole difficulty. She won't talk your particular language, and on that account you think she's ill.'

'No, Henry; it's sweet of you, but I couldn't.'

'I see,' he said; 'you have scruples.'

'I suppose so.'

'And sooner than go against them you would have your sister suffer. You could have got her down to Swanage by a word, but you had scruples. And scruples are all very well. I am as scrupulous as any man alive, I hope; but when it is a case like this, when there is a question of madness—'

'I deny it's madness.'

'You said just now—'

'It's madness when I say it, but not when you say it.'

Henry shrugged his shoulders. 'Margaret! Margaret!' he groaned. 'No education can teach a woman logic. Now, my dear, my time is valuable. Do you want me to help you or not?'

'Not in that way.'

'Answer my question. Plain question, plain answer. Do—'

Charles surprised them by interrupting. 'Pater, we may as well keep Howards End out of it,' he said.

'Why, Charles?'

Charles could give no reason; but Margaret felt as if, over tremendous distances, a salutation had passed between them.

'The whole house is at sixes and sevens,' he said crossly. 'We don't want any more mess.'

'Who's "we"?' asked his father. 'My boy, pray, who's "we"?'

'I am sure I beg your pardon,' said Charles. 'I appear always to be intruding.'

By now Margaret wished she had never mentioned her trouble to her husband. Retreat was impossible. He was determined to push the matter to a satisfactory conclusion, and Helen faded as he talked. Her fair, flying hair and eager eyes counted for nothing, for she was ill, without rights, and any of her friends might hunt her. Sick at heart, Margaret joined in the chase. She wrote her sister a lying letter, at her husband's dictation; she said the furniture was all at Howards End, but could be seen on Monday next at 3.0 p.m., when a charwoman would be in attendance. It was a cold letter, and the more plausible for that. Helen would think she was offended. And on Monday next she and Henry were to lunch with Dolly, and then ambush themselves in the garden.

After they had gone, Mr Wilcox said to his son: 'I can't have this sort of behaviour, my boy. Margaret's too sweet-natured to mind, but I mind for her.'

Charles made no answer.

'Is anything wrong with you, Charles, this afternoon?'

'No, pater; but you may be taking on a bigger business than you reckon.'

'How?'

'Don't ask me.'

One speaks of the moods of spring, but the days that are her true children have only one mood: they are all full of the rising and dropping of winds, and the whistling of birds. New flowers may come out, the green embroidery of the hedges increase, but the same heaven broods overhead, soft, thick and blue, the same figures, seen and unseen, are wandering by coppice and meadow. The morning that Margaret had spent with Miss Avery, and the afternoon she set out to entrap Helen, were the scales of a single balance. Time might never have moved, rain never have fallen, and man alone, with his schemes and ailments, was troubling Nature until he saw her through a veil of tears.

She protested no more. Whether Henry was right or wrong, he was most kind, and she knew of no other standard by which to judge him. She must trust him absolutely. As soon as he had taken up a business, his obtuseness vanished. He profited by the slightest indications, and the capture of Helen promised to be staged as deltly as the marriage of Evie.

They went down in the morning as arranged, and he discovered that their victim was actually in Hilton. On his arrival he called at all the livery-stables in the village, and had a few minutes' serious conversation with the proprietors. What he said, Margaret did not know—perhaps not the truth; but news arrived after lunch that a lady had come by the London train, and had taken a fly to Howards End.

'She was bound to drive,' said Henry. 'There will be her books.'

'I cannot make it out,' said Margaret for the hundredth time.

'Finish your coffee, dear. We must be off.'

'Yes, Margaret, you know you must take plenty,' said Dolly.

Margaret tried, but suddenly lifted her hand to her eyes. Dolly stole glances at her father-in-law which he did not answer. In the silence the motor came round to the door.

'You're not fit for it,' he said anxiously. 'Let me go alone. I know exactly what to do.'

'Oh yes, I am fit,' said Margaret, uncovering her face. 'Only most frightfully worried. I cannot feel that Helen is really alive. Her letters and telegrams seem to have come from someone else. Her voice isn't in them. I don't believe your driver really saw her at the station. I wish I'd never mentioned it. I know that Charles is vexed. Yes, he is—' She seized Dolly's hand and kissed it. 'There, Dolly will forgive me. There. Now we'll be off.'

Henry had been looking at her closely. He did not like this breakdown.

'Don't you want to tidy yourself?' he asked.

'Have I time?'

'Yes, plenty.'

She went to the lavatory by the front door, and as soon as the bolt slipped Mr Wilcox said quietly:

'Dolly, I'm going without her.'

Dolly's eyes lit up with vulgar excitement. She followed him on tiptoe out to the car.

'Tell her I thought it best.'

'Yes, Mr Wilcox, I see.'

'Say anything you like. All right.'

The car started well, and with ordinary luck would have got away. But Porgly-woggles, who was playing in the garden, chose this moment to sit down in the middle of the path. Crane, in trying to pass him, ran one wheel over a bed of wallflowers. Dolly screamed. Margaret, hearing the noise, rushed out hatless, and was in time to jump on the foot-board. She said not a single word; he was only treating her as she had treated Helen, and her rage at his dishonesty only helped to indicate what Helen would feel against them. She thought: 'I deserve it; I am punished for lowering my colours.'[1] And she accepted his apologies with a calmness that astonished him.

'I still consider you are not fit for it,' he kept saying.

'Perhaps I was not at lunch. But the whole thing is spread clearly before me now.'

'I was meaning to act for the best.'

'Just lend me your scarf, will you. This wind takes one's hair so.'

'Certainly, dear girl. Are you all right now?'

'Look! My hands have stopped trembling.'

'And have quite forgiven me? Then listen. Her cab should already have arrived at Howards End. (We're a little late, but no matter.) Our first move will be to send it down to wait at the farm, as, if possible, one doesn't want a scene before servants. A certain gentleman'—he pointed at Crane's back—'won't drive in, but will wait a little short of the front gate, behind the laurels. Have you still the keys of the house?'

'Yes.'

'Well, they aren't wanted. Do you remember how the house stands?'

'Yes.'

'If we don't find her in the porch, we can stroll round into the garden. Our object—'

Here they stopped to pick up the doctor.

'I was just saying to my wife, Mansbridge, that our main object is not to frighten Miss Schlegel. The house, as you know, is my property, so it should seem quite natural for us to be there. The trouble is evidently nervous—wouldn't you say so, Margaret?'

The doctor, a very young man, began to ask questions about Helen. Was she normal? Was there anything congenital or hereditary? Had anything occurred that was likely to alienate her from her family?

'Nothing,' answered Margaret, wondering what would have happened if she had added: 'Though she did resent

my husband's immorality.'

'She always was highly strung,' pursued Henry, leaning back in the car as it shot past the church. 'A tendency to spiritualism and those things, though nothing serious. Musical, literary, artistic, but I should say normal—a very charming girl.'

Margaret's anger and terror increased every moment. How dare these men label her sister! What horrors lay ahead! What impertinences that shelter under the name of science! The pack was turning on Helen, to deny her human rights, and it seemed to Margaret that all Schlegels were threatened with her. Were they normal? What a question to ask! And it is always those who know nothing about human nature, who are bored by psychology and shocked by physiology, who ask it. However piteous her sister's state, she knew that she must be on her side. They would be mad together if the world chose to consider them so.

It was now five minutes past three. The car slowed down by the farm, in the yard of which Miss Avery was standing. Henry asked her whether a cab had gone past. She nodded, and the next moment they caught sight of it, at the end of the lane. The car ran silently like a beast of prey. So unsuspicious was Helen that she was sitting in the porch, with her back to the road. She had come. Only her head and shoulders were visible. She sat framed in the vine, and one of her hands played with the buds. The wind ruffled her hair, the sun glorified it; she was as she had always been.

Margaret was seated next to the door. Before her husband could prevent her, she slipped out. She ran to the garden gate, which was shut, passed through it, and deliberately pushed it in his face. The noise alarmed Helen. Margaret saw her rise with an unfamiliar movement, and, rushing into the porch, learned the simple explanation of all their fears—her sister was with child.

'Is the truant all right?' called Henry.

She had time to whisper: 'Oh, my darling—' The keys of the house were in her hand. She unlocked Howards End and thrust Helen into it. 'Yes, all right,' she said, and stood with her back to the door.

XXXVI

'MARGARET, YOU LOOK UPSET!' said Henry.

Mansbridge had followed. Crane was at the gate, and the flyman had stood up on the box. Margaret shook her head at them; she could not speak any more. She remained clutching the keys, as if all their future depended on them. Henry was asking more questions. She shook her head again. His words had no sense. She heard him wonder why she had let Helen in. 'You might have given me a knock with the gate,' was another of his remarks. Presently she heard herself speaking. She, or someone for her, said: 'Go away.' Henry came nearer. He repeated: 'Margaret, you look upset again. My dear, give me the keys. What are you doing with Helen?'

'Oh, dearest, do go away, and I will manage it all.'

'Manage what?'

He stretched out his hand for the keys. She might have obeyed if it had not been for the doctor.

'Stop that at least,' she said piteously; the doctor had turned back, and was questioning the driver of Helen's cab. A new feeling came over her: she was fighting for women against men. She did not care about rights, but if men came into Howards End it should be over her body.

'Come, this is an odd beginning,' said her husband.

The doctor came forward now, and whispered two words to Mr Wilcox—the scandal was out. Sincerely horrified, Henry stood gazing at the earth.

'I cannot help it,' said Margaret. 'Do wait. It's not my fault. Please all four of you to go away now.'

Now the flyman was whispering to Crane.

'We are relying on you to help us, Mrs Wilcox,' said the young doctor. 'Could you go in and persuade your sister to come out?'

'On what grounds?' said Margaret, suddenly looking him straight in the eyes.

Thinking it professional to prevaricate, he murmured something about a nervous breakdown.

'I beg your pardon, but it is nothing of the sort. You are not qualified to attend my sister, Mr Mansbridge. If we require your services, we will let you know.'

'I can diagnose the case more bluntly if you wish,' he retorted.

'You could, but you have not. You are, therefore, not qualified to attend my sister.'

'Come, come, Margaret!' said Henry, never raising his eyes. 'This is a terrible business, an appalling business. It's doctor's orders. Open the door.'

'Forgive me, but I will not.'

'I don't agree.'

Margaret was silent.

'This business is as broad as it's long,' contributed the doctor. 'We had better all work together. You need us, Mrs Wilcox, and we need you.'

'Quite so,' said Henry.

'I do not need you in the least,' said Margaret.

The two men looked at each other anxiously.

'No more does my sister, who is still many weeks from her confinement.'

'Margaret, Margaret!'

'Well, Henry, send your doctor away. What possible use is he now?'

Mr Wilcox ran his eye over the house. He had a vague feeling that he must stand firm and support the doctor. He himself might need support, for there was trouble ahead.

'It all turns on affection now,' said Margaret. 'Affection. Don't you see?' Resuming her usual methods, she wrote the word on the house with her finger. 'Surely you see. I like Helen very much, you not so much. Mr Mansbridge doesn't know her. That's all. And affection, when reciprocated, gives rights. Put that down in your notebook, Mr Mansbridge. It's a useful formula.'

Henry told her to be calm.

'You don't know what you want yourselves,' said Margaret, folding her arms. 'For one sensible remark I will let you in. But you cannot make it. You would trouble my sister for no reason. I will not permit it. I'll stand here all the day sooner.'

'Mansbridge,' said Henry in a low voice, 'perhaps not now.'

The pack was breaking up. At a sign from his master, Crane also went back into the car.

'Now, Henry, you,' she said gently. None of her bitterness had been directed at him. 'Go away now, dear. I shall want your advice later, no doubt. Forgive me if I have been cross. But, seriously, you must go.'

He was too stupid to leave her. Now it was Mr Mansbridge who called in a low voice to him.

'I shall soon find you down at Dolly's,' she called, as the gate at last clanged between them. The fly moved out of the way, the motor backed, turned a little, backed again, and turned in the narrow road. A string of farm carts

came up in the middle; but she waited through all, for there was no hurry. When all was over and the car had started, she opened the door. ‘Oh, my darling!’ she said. ‘My darling, forgive me.’ Helen was standing in the hall.

XXXVII

MARGARET BOLTED THE DOOR on the inside. Then she would have kissed her sister, but Helen, in a dignified voice, that came strangely from her, said:

‘Convenient! You did not tell me that the books were unpacked. I have found nearly everything that I want.’

‘I told you nothing that was true.’

‘It has been a great surprise, certainly. Has Aunt Juley been ill?’

‘Helen, you wouldn’t think I’d invent that?’

‘I suppose not,’ said Helen, turning away, and crying a very little. ‘But one loses faith in everything after this.’

‘We thought it was illness, but even then—I haven’t behaved worthily.’

Helen selected another book.

‘I ought not to have consulted anyone. What would our father have thought of me?’

She did not think of questioning her sister, nor of rebuking her. Both might be necessary in the future, but she had first to purge a greater crime than any that Helen could have committed—that want of confidence that is the work of the devil.

‘Yes, I am annoyed,’ replied Helen. ‘My wishes should have been respected. I would have gone through this meeting if it was necessary, but after Aunt Juley recovered it was not necessary. Planning my life, as I now have to do—’

‘Come away from those books,’ called Margaret. ‘Helen, do talk to me.’

‘I was just saying that I have stopped living haphazard. One can’t go through a great deal of—’ she missed out the noun—’without planning one’s actions in advance. I am going to have a child in June, and in the first place conversations, discussions, excitement, are not good for me. I will go through them if necessary, but only then. In the second place I have no right to trouble people. I cannot fit in with England as I know it. I have done something that the English never pardon. It would not be right for them to pardon it. So I must live where I am not known.’

‘But why didn’t you tell me, dearest?’

‘Yes,’ replied Helen judicially. ‘I might have, but decided to wait.’

‘I believe you would never have told me.’

‘Oh yes, I should. We have taken a flat in Munich.’

Margaret glanced out of the window.

‘By “we” I mean myself and Monica. But for her, I am and have been and always wish to be alone.’

‘I have not heard of Monica.’

‘You wouldn’t have. She’s an Italian—by birth at least. She makes her living by journalism. I met her originally on Garda. Monica is much the best person to see me through.’

‘You are very fond of her, then.’

‘She has been extraordinarily sensible with me.’

Margaret guessed at Monica’s type—’Italiano inglesiato’[1] they had named it: the crude feminist of the South, whom one respects but avoids. And Helen had turned to it in her need!

‘You must not think that we shall never meet,’ said Helen, with a measured kindness. ‘I shall always have a room for you when you can be spared, and the longer you can be with me the better. But you haven’t understood yet, Meg, and of course it is very difficult for you. This is a shock to you. It isn’t to me, who have been thinking over our futures for many months, and they won’t be changed by a slight contretemps such as this. I cannot live in England.’

‘Helen, you’ve not forgiven me for my treachery. You *couldn’t* talk like this to me if you had.’

‘Oh, Meg dear, why do we talk at all?’ She dropped a book and sighed wearily. Then, recovering herself, she said: ‘Tell me, how is it that all the books are down here?’

‘Series of mistakes.’

‘And a great deal of the furniture has been unpacked.’

‘All.’

‘Who lives here, then?’

‘No one.’

‘I suppose you are letting it, though.’

‘The house is dead,’ said Margaret, with a frown. ‘Why worry on about it?’

‘But I am interested. You talk as if I had lost all my interest in life. I am still Helen, I hope. Now this hasn’t the feel of a dead house. The hall seems more alive even than in the old days, when it held the Wilcoxes’ own things.’

‘Interested, are you? Very well, I must tell you, I suppose. My husband lent it on condition we—but by a mistake all our things were unpacked, and Miss Avery, instead of—’ She stopped. ‘Look here, I can’t go on like this. I warn

you, I won't. Helen, why should you be so miserably unkind to me, simply because you hate Henry?'

'I don't hate him now,' said Helen. 'I have stopped being a schoolgirl, and, Meg, once again, I'm not being unkind. But as for fitting in with your English life—no, put it out of your head at once. Imagine a visit from me at Ducie Street! It's unthinkable.'

Margaret could not contradict her. It was appalling to see her quietly moving forward with her plans, not bitter or excitable, neither asserting innocence nor confessing guilt, merely desiring freedom and the company of those who would not blame her. She had been through—how much? Margaret did not know. But it was enough to part her from old habits as well as old friends.

'Tell me about yourself,' said Helen, who had chosen her books, and was lingering over the furniture.

'There's nothing to tell.'

'But your marriage has been happy, Meg?'

'Yes, but I don't feel inclined to talk.'

'You feel as I do.'

'Not that, but I can't.'

'No more can I. It is a nuisance, but no good trying.'

Something had come between them. Perhaps it was society, which henceforward would exclude Helen. Perhaps it was a third life, already potent as a spirit. They could find no meeting-place. Both suffered acutely, and were not comforted by the knowledge that affection survived.

'Look here, Meg, is the coast clear?'

'You mean that you want to go away from me?'

'I suppose so—dear old lady! It isn't any use. I knew we should have nothing to say. Give my love to Aunt Juley and Tibby, and take more yourself than I can say. Promise to come and see me in Munich later.'

'Certainly, dearest.'

'For that is all we can do.'

It seemed so. Most ghastly of all was Helen's common sense: Monica had been extraordinarily good for her.

'I am glad to have seen you and the things.' She looked at the bookcase lovingly, as if she was saying farewell to the past.

Margaret unbolted the door. She remarked: 'The car has gone, and here's your cab.'

She led the way to it, glancing at the leaves and the sky. The spring had never seemed more beautiful. The driver, who was leaning on the gate, called out, 'Please, lady, a message,' and handed her Henry's visiting-card through the bars.

'How did this come?' she asked.

Crane had returned with it almost at once.

She read the card with annoyance. It was covered with instructions in domestic French. When she and her sister had talked she was to come back for the night to Dolly's. 'Il faut dormir sur ce sujet.' While Helen was to be found 'une confortable chambre à l'hotel.'[2] The final sentence displeased her greatly until she remembered that the Charleses had only one spare room, and so could not invite a third guest.

'Henry would have done what he could,' she interpreted.

Helen had not followed her into the garden. The door once open, she lost her inclination to fly. She remained in the hall, going from bookcase to table. She grew more like the old Helen, irresponsible and charming.

'This *is* Mr Wilcox's house?' she inquired.

'Surely you remember Howards End?'

'Remember? I who remember everything! But it looks to be ours now.'

'Miss Avery was extraordinary,' said Margaret, her own spirits lightening a little. Again she was invaded by a slight feeling of disloyalty. But it brought her relief, and she yielded to it. 'She loved Mrs Wilcox, and would rather furnish her house with our things than think of it empty. In consequence here are all the library books.'

'Not all the books. She hasn't unpacked the art books, in which she may show her sense. And we never used to have the sword here.'

'The sword looks well, though.'

'Magnificent.'

'Yes, doesn't it?'

'Where's the piano, Meg?'

'I warehoused that in London. Why?'

'Nothing.'

'Curious, too, that the carpet fits.'

'The carpet's a mistake,' announced Helen. 'I know that we had it in London, but this floor ought to be bare. It is far too beautiful.'

'You still have a mania for underfurnishing. Would you care to come into the dining-room before you start? There's no carpet there.'

They went in, and each minute their talk became more natural.

'Oh, *what* a place for mother's chiffonier!' cried Helen.

'Look at the chairs, though.'

'Oh, look at them! Wickham Place faced north, didn't it?'

‘North-west.’

‘Anyhow, it is thirty years since any of those chairs have felt the sun. Feel. Their dear little backs are quite warm.’

‘But why has Miss Avery made them set to partners?[3] I shall just—’

‘Over here, Meg. Put it so that anyone sitting will see the lawn.’

Margaret moved a chair. Helen sat down in it.

‘Ye-es. The window’s too high.’

‘Try a drawing-room chair.’

‘No, I don’t like the drawing-room so much. The beam has been match-boarded. It would have been so beautiful otherwise.’

‘Helen, what a memory you have for some things! You’re perfectly right. It’s a room that men have spoilt through trying to make it nice for women. Men don’t know what we want—’

‘And never will.’

‘I don’t agree. In two thousand years they’ll know.’

‘But the chairs show up wonderfully. Look where Tibby spilt the soup.’

‘Coffee. It was coffee surely.’

Helen shook her head. ‘Impossible. Tibby was far too young to be given coffee at that time.’

‘Was father alive?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’re right and it must have been soup. I was thinking of much later—that unsuccessful visit of Aunt Juley’s, when she didn’t realize that Tibby had grown up. It was coffee then, for he threw it down on purpose. There was some rhyme, “Tea, coffee—coffee, tea,” that she said to him every morning at breakfast. Wait a minute—how did it go?’

‘I know—no, I don’t. What a detestable boy Tibby was!’

‘But the rhyme was simply awful. No decent person could have put up with it.’

‘Ah, that greengage tree,’ cried Helen, as if the garden was also part of their childhood. ‘Why do I connect it with dumb-bells?[4] And there come the chickens. The grass wants cutting. I love yellowhammers—’

Margaret interrupted her. ‘I have got it,’ she announced.

‘Tea, tea, coffee, tea,
Or chocolaritee.

That every morning for three weeks. No wonder Tibby was wild.’

‘Tibby is moderately a dear now,’ said Helen.

‘There! I knew you’d say that in the end. Of course he’s a dear.’

A bell rang.

‘Listen! What’s that?’

Helen said, ‘Perhaps the Wilcoxes are beginning the siege.’

‘What nonsense—listen!’

And the triviality faded from their faces, though it left something behind—the knowledge that they never could be parted because their love was rooted in common things. Explanations and appeals had failed; they had tried for a common meeting-ground, and had only made each other unhappy. And all the time their salvation was lying round them—the past sanctifying the present; the present, with wild heart-throb, declaring that there would after all be a future, with laughter and the voices of children. Helen, still smiling, came up to her sister. She said: ‘It is always Meg.’ They looked into each other’s eyes. The inner life had paid.

Solemnly the clapper tolled. No one was in the front. Margaret went to the kitchen, and struggled between packing-cases to the window. Their visitor was only a little boy with a tin can. And triviality returned.

‘Little boy, what do you want?’

‘Please, I am the milk.’

‘Did Miss Avery send you?’ said Margaret, rather sharply.

‘Yes, please.’

‘Then take it back and say we require no milk.’ While she called to Helen: ‘No, it’s not the siege, but possibly an attempt to provision us against one.’

‘But I like milk,’ cried Helen. ‘Why send it away?’

‘Do you? Oh, very well. But we’ve nothing to put it in, and he wants the can.’

‘Please, I’m to call in the morning for the can,’ said the boy.

‘The house will be locked up then.’

‘In the morning would I bring eggs, too?’

‘Are you the boy whom I saw playing in the stacks last week?’

The child hung his head.

‘Well, run away and do it again.’

‘Nice little boy,’ whispered Helen. ‘I say, what’s your name? Mine’s Helen.’

‘Tom.’

That was Helen all over. The Wilcoxes, too, would ask a child its name, but they never told their names in return.

'Tom, this one here is Margaret. And at home we've another called Tibby.'

'Mine are lop-eareds,' replied Tom, supposing Tibby to be a rabbit.

'You're a very good and rather a clever little boy. Mind you come again—isn't he charming?'

'Undoubtedly,' said Margaret. 'He is probably the son of Madge, and Madge is dreadful. But this place has wonderful powers.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know.'

'Because I probably agree with you.'

'It kills what is dreadful and makes what is beautiful live.'

'I do agree,' said Helen, as she sipped the milk. 'But you said that the house was dead not half an hour ago.'

'Meaning that I was dead. I felt it.'

'Yes, the house has a surer life than we, even if it was empty, and, as it is, I can't get over that for thirty years the sun has never shone full on our furniture. After all, Wickham Place was a grave. Meg, I've a startling idea.'

'What is it?'

'Drink some milk to steady you.'

Margaret obeyed.

'No, I won't tell you yet,' said Helen, 'because you may laugh or be angry. Let's go upstairs first and give the rooms an airing.'

They opened window after window, till the inside, too, was rustling to the spring. Curtains blew, picture frames tapped cheerfully. Helen uttered cries of excitement as she found this bed obviously in its right place, that in its wrong one. She was angry with Miss Avery for not having moved the wardrobes up. 'Then one would see really.' She admired the view. She was the Helen who had written the memorable letters four years ago. As they leant out, looking westward, she said: 'About my idea. Couldn't you and I camp out in this house for the night?'

'I don't think we could well do that,' said Margaret.

'Here are beds, tables, towels—'

'I know; but the house isn't supposed to be slept in, and Henry's suggestion was—'

'I require no suggestions. I shall not alter anything in my plans. But it would give me so much pleasure to have one night here with you. It will be something to look back on. Oh, Meg lovey, do let's!'

'But, Helen, my pet,' said Margaret, 'we can't without getting Henry's leave. Of course, he would give it, but you said yourself that you couldn't visit at Ducie Street now, and this is equally intimate.'

'Ducie Street is his house. This is ours. Our furniture, our sort of people coming to the door. Do let us camp out, just one night, and Tom shall feed us on eggs and milk. Why not? It's a moon.'[5]

Margaret hesitated. 'I feel Charles wouldn't like it,' she said at last. 'Even our furniture annoyed him, and I was going to clear it out when Aunt Juley's illness prevented me. I sympathize with Charles. He feels it's his mother's house. He loves it in rather an untaking way. Henry I could answer for—not Charles.'

'I know he won't like it,' said Helen. 'But I am going to pass out of their lives. What difference will it make in the long run if they say, "And she even spent the night at Howards End"?'

'How do you know you'll pass out of their lives? We have thought that twice before.'

'Because my plans—'

'—which you change in a moment.'

'Then because my life is great and theirs are little,' said Helen, taking fire. 'I know of things they can't know of, and so do you. We *know* that there's poetry. We *know* that there's death. They can only take them on hearsay. We know this is our house, because it feels ours. Oh, they may take the title-deeds and the door-keys, but for this one night we are at home.'

'It would be lovely to have you once more alone,' said Margaret. 'It may be a chance in a thousand.'

'Yes, and we could talk.' She dropped her voice. 'It won't be a very glorious story. But under that wych-elm—honestly, I see little happiness ahead. Cannot I have this one night with you?'

'I needn't say how much it would mean to me.'

'Then let us.'

'It is no good hesitating. Shall I drive down to Hilton now and get leave?'

'Oh, we don't want leave.'

But Margaret was a loyal wife. In spite of imagination and poetry—perhaps on account of them—she could sympathize with the technical attitude that Henry would adopt. If possible, she would be technical, too. A night's lodging—and they demanded no more—need not involve the discussion of general principles.

'Charles may say no,' grumbled Helen.

'We shan't consult him.'

'Go if you like; I should have stopped without leave.'

It was the touch of selfishness, which was not enough to mar Helen's character, and even added to its beauty. She would have stopped without leave, and escaped to Germany the next morning. Margaret kissed her.

'Expect me back before dark. I am looking forward to it so much. It is like you to have thought of such a beautiful thing.'

‘Not a thing, only an ending,’ said Helen rather sadly; and the sense of tragedy closed in on Margaret again as soon as she left the house.

She was afraid of Miss Avery. It is disquieting to fulfil a prophecy, however superficially. She was glad to see no watching figure as she drove past the farm, but only little Tom, turning somersaults in the straw.

XXXVIII

THE TRAGEDY BEGAN QUIETLY enough, and, like many another talk, by the man’s deft assertion of his superiority. Henry heard her arguing with the driver, stepped out and settled the fellow, who was inclined to be rude, and then led the way to some chairs on the lawn. Dolly, who had not been ‘told’, ran out with offers of tea. He refused them, and ordered her to wheel baby’s perambulator away, as they desired to be alone.

‘But the diddums can’t listen; he isn’t nine months old,’ she pleaded.

‘That’s not what I was saying,’ retorted her father-in-law.

Baby was wheeled out of earshot, and did not hear about the crisis till later years. It was now the turn of Margaret.

‘Is it what we feared?’ he asked.

‘It is.’

‘Dear girl,’ he began, ‘there is a troublesome business ahead of us, and nothing but the most absolute honesty and plain speech will see us through.’ Margaret bent her head. ‘I am obliged to question you on subjects we’d both prefer to leave untouched. As you know, I am not one of your Bernard Shaws who consider nothing sacred. To speak as I must will pain me, but there are occasions—we are husband and wife, not children. I am a man of the world, and you are a most exceptional woman.’

All Margaret’s senses forsook her. She blushed, and looked past him at the Six Hills, covered with spring herbage. Noting her colour, he grew still more kind.

‘I see that you feel as I felt when—my poor little wife! Oh, be brave! Just one or two questions, and I have done with you. Was your sister wearing a wedding-ring?’

Margaret stammered a ‘No’.

There was an appalling silence.

‘Henry, I really came to ask a favour about Howards End.’

‘One point at a time. I am now obliged to ask for the name of her seducer.’

She rose to her feet and held the chair between them. Her colour had ebbed, and she was gray. It did not displease him that she should receive his question thus.

‘Take your time,’ he counselled her. ‘Remember that this is far worse for me than for you.’

She swayed; he feared she was going to faint. Then speech came, and she said slowly: ‘Seducer? No; I do not know her seducer’s name.’

‘Would she not tell you?’

‘I never even asked her who seduced her,’ said Margaret, dwelling on the hateful word thoughtfully.

‘That is singular.’ Then he changed his mind. ‘Natural perhaps, dear girl, that you shouldn’t ask. But until his name is known nothing can be done. Sit down. How terrible it is to see you so upset! I knew you weren’t fit for it. I wish I hadn’t taken you.’

Margaret answered: ‘I like to stand, if you don’t mind, for it gives me a pleasant view of the Six Hills.’

‘As you like.’

‘Have you anything else to ask me, Henry?’

‘Next you must tell me whether you have gathered anything. I have often noticed your insight, dear. I only wish my own was as good. You may have guessed something, even though your sister said nothing. The slightest hint would help us.’

‘Who is “we”?’

‘I thought it best to ring up Charles.’

‘That was unnecessary,’ said Margaret, growing warmer. ‘This news will give Charles disproportionate pain.’

‘He has at once gone to call on your brother.’

‘That too was unnecessary.’

‘Let me explain, dear, how the matter stands. You don’t think that I and my son are other than gentlemen? It is in Helen’s interests that we are acting. It is still not too late to save her name.’

Then Margaret hit out for the first time. ‘Are we to make her seducer marry her?’ she asked.

‘If possible. Yes.’

‘But, Henry, suppose he turned out to be married already? One has heard of such cases.’

‘In that case he must pay heavily for his misconduct, and be thrashed within an inch of his life.’

So her first blow missed. She was thankful of it. What had tempted her to imperil both of their lives? Henry’s obtuseness had saved her as well as himself. Exhausted with anger, she sat down again, blinking at him as he told

her as much as he thought fit. At last she said: ‘May I ask you my question now?’

‘Certainly, my dear.’

‘Tomorrow Helen goes to Munich—’

‘Well, possibly she is right.’

‘Henry, let a lady finish. Tomorrow she goes; tonight, with your permission, she would like to sleep at Howards End.’

It was the crisis of his life. Again she would have recalled the words as soon as they were uttered. She had not led up to them with sufficient care. She longed to warn him that they were far more important than he supposed. She saw him weighing them, as if they were a business proposition.

‘Why Howards End?’ he said at last. ‘Would she not be more comfortable, as I suggested, at the hotel?’

Margaret hastened to give him reasons. ‘It is an odd request, but you know what Helen is and what women in her state are.’ He frowned, and moved irritably. ‘She has the idea that one night in your house would give her pleasure and do her good. I think she’s right. Being one of those imaginative girls, the presence of all our books and furniture soothes her. This is a fact. It is the end of her girlhood. Her last words to me were “A beautiful ending”.’

‘She values the old furniture for sentimental reasons, in fact.’

‘Exactly. You have quite understood. It is her last hope of being with it.’

‘I don’t agree there, my dear! Helen will have her share of the goods wherever she goes—possibly more than her share, for you are so fond of her that you’d give her anything of yours that she fancies, wouldn’t you? And I’d raise no objection. I could understand it if it was her old home, because a home, or a house’—he changed the word, designedly; he had thought of a telling point—’because a house in which one has once lived becomes in a sort of way sacred, I don’t know why. Associations and so on. Now Helen has no associations with Howards End, though I and Charles and Evie have. I do not see why she wants to stay the night there. She will only catch cold.’

‘Leave it that you don’t see,’ cried Margaret. ‘Call it fancy. But realize that fancy is a scientific fact. Helen is fanciful, and wants to.’

Then he surprised her—a rare occurrence. He shot an unexpected bolt. ‘If she wants to sleep one night, she may want to sleep two. We shall never get her out of the house, perhaps.’

‘Well?’ said Margaret, with the precipice in sight. ‘And suppose we don’t get her out of the house? Would it matter? She would do no one any harm.’

Again the irritated gesture.

‘No, Henry,’ she panted, receding. ‘I didn’t mean that. We will only trouble Howards End for this one night. I take her to London tomorrow—’

‘Do you intend to sleep in a damp house, too?’

‘She cannot be left alone.’

‘That’s quite impossible! Madness. You must be here to meet Charles.’

‘I have already told you that your message to Charles was unnecessary, and I have no desire to meet him.’

‘Margaret—my Margaret—’

‘What has this business to do with Charles? If it concerns me little, it concerns you less, and Charles not at all.’

‘As the future owner of Howards End,’ said Mr Wilcox, arching his fingers, ‘I should say that it did concern Charles.’

‘In what way? Will Helen’s condition depreciate the property?’

‘My dear, you are forgetting yourself.’

‘I think you yourself recommended plain speaking.’

They looked at each other in amazement. The precipice was at their feet now.

‘Helen commands my sympathy,’ said Henry. ‘As your husband, I shall do all for her that I can, and I have no doubt that she will prove more sinned against than sinning. But I cannot treat her as if nothing has happened. I should be false to my position in society if I did.’

She controlled herself for the last time. ‘No, let us go back to Helen’s request,’ she said. ‘It is unreasonable, but the request of an unhappy girl. Tomorrow she will go to Germany, and trouble society no longer. Tonight she asks to sleep in your empty house—a house which you do not care about, and which you have not occupied for over a year. May she? Will you give my sister leave? Will you forgive her—as you hope to be forgiven, and as you have actually been forgiven? Forgive her for one night only. That will be enough.’

‘As I have actually been forgiven—?’

‘Never mind for the moment what I mean by that,’ said Margaret. ‘Answer my question.’

Perhaps some hint of her meaning did dawn on him. If so, he blotted it out. Straight from his fortress he answered: ‘I seem rather unaccommodating, but I have some experience of life, and know how one thing leads to another. I am afraid that your sister had better sleep at the hotel. I have my children and the memory of my dear wife to consider. I am sorry, but see that she leaves my house at once.’

‘You have mentioned Mrs Wilcox.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A rare occurrence. In reply, may I mention Mrs Bast?’

‘You have not been yourself all day,’ said Henry, and rose from his seat with face unmoved. Margaret rushed at him and seized both his hands. She was transfigured.

‘Not any more of this!’ she cried. ‘You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress—I forgave you. My sister has a lover—you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? Stupid, hypocritical, cruel—oh, contemptible!—a man who insults his wife when she’s alive and cants with her memory when she’s dead. A man who ruins a woman for his pleasure, and casts her off to ruin other men. And gives bad financial advice, and then says he is not responsible. These men are you. You can’t recognize them, because you cannot connect. I’ve had enough of your unweeded kindness. I’ve spoilt you long enough. All your life you have been spoilt. Mrs Wilcox spoiled you. No one has ever told you what you are—muddled, criminally muddled. Men like you use repentance as a blind, so don’t repent. Only say to yourself: “What Helen has done, I’ve done.”’

‘The two cases are different,’ Henry stammered. His real retort was not quite ready. His brain was still in a whirl, and he wanted a little longer.

‘In what way different? You have betrayed Mrs Wilcox, Helen only herself. You remain in society, Helen can’t. You have had only pleasure, she may die. You have the insolence to talk to me of differences, Henry?’

Oh, the uselessness of it! Henry’s retort came.

‘I perceive you are attempting blackmail. It is scarcely a pretty weapon for a wife to use against her husband. My rule through life has been never to pay the least attention to threats, and I can only repeat what I said before: I do not give you and your sister leave to sleep at Howards End.’

Margaret loosed his hands. He went into the house, wiping first one and then the other on his handkerchief. For a little she stood looking at the Six Hills, tombs of warriors, breasts of the spring. Then she passed out into what was now the evening.

XXXIX

Charles and Tibby met at Ducie Street, where the latter was staying. Their interview was short and absurd. They had nothing in common but the English language, and tried by its help to express what neither of them understood. Charles saw in Helen the family foe. He had singled her out as the most dangerous of the Schlegels, and, angry as he was, looked forward to telling his wife how right he had been. His mind was made up at once: the girl must be got out of the way before she disgraced them further. If occasion offered she might be married to a villain or, possibly, to a fool. But this was a concession to morality, it formed no part of his main scheme. Honest and hearty was Charles’s dislike, and the past spread itself out very clearly before him; hatred is a skilful compositor. As if they were heads in a notebook, he ran through all the incidents of the Schlegels’ campaign: the attempt to compromise his brother, his mother’s legacy, his father’s marriage, the introduction of the furniture, the unpacking of the same. He had not yet heard of the request to sleep at Howards End; that was to be their masterstroke and the opportunity for his. But he already felt that Howards End was the objective, and, though he disliked the house, was determined to defend it.

Tibby, on the other hand, had no opinions. He stood above the conventions; his sister had a right to do what she thought right. It is not difficult to stand above the conventions when we leave no hostages among them; men can always be more unconventional than women, and a bachelor of independent means need encounter no difficulties at all. Unlike Charles, Tibby had money enough; his ancestors had earned it for him, and if he shocked the people in one set of lodgings he had only to move into another. His was the leisure without sympathy—an attitude as fatal as the strenuous: a little cold culture may be raised on it, but no art. His sisters had seen the family danger, and had never forgotten to discount the gold islets that raised them from the sea. Tibby gave all the praise to himself, and so despised the struggling and the submerged.

Hence the absurdity of the interview; the gulf between them was economic as well as spiritual. But several facts passed; Charles pressed for them with an impertinence that the undergraduate could not withstand. On what date had Helen gone abroad? To whom? (Charles was anxious to fasten the scandal on Germany.) Then, changing his tactics, he said roughly: ‘I suppose you realize that you are your sister’s protector?’

‘In what sense?’

‘If a man played about with my sister, I’d send a bullet through him, but perhaps you don’t mind.’

‘I mind very much,’ protested Tibby.

‘Who d’ye suspect, then? Speak out, man. One always suspects someone.’

‘No one. I don’t think so.’ Involuntarily he blushed. He had remembered the scene in his Oxford rooms.

‘You are hiding something,’ said Charles. As interviews go, he got the best of this one. ‘When you saw her last, did she mention anyone’s name? Yes or no!’ he thundered, so that Tibby started.

‘In my rooms she mentioned some friends called the Basts—’

‘Who are the Basts?’

‘People—friends of hers at Evie’s wedding.’

‘I don’t remember. But, by great Scott! I do. My aunt told me about some tagrag. Was she full of them when you saw her? Is there a man? Did she speak of the man? Or—look here—have you had any dealings with him?’

Tibby was silent. Without intending it, he had betrayed his sister’s confidence; he was not enough interested in

human life to see where things will lead to. He had a strong regard for honesty, and his word, once given, had always been kept up to now. He was deeply vexed, not only for the harm he had done Helen, but for the flaw he had discovered in his own equipment.

'I see—you are in his confidence. They met at your rooms. Oh, what a family, what a family! God help the poor pater—'

And Tibby found himself alone.

XXL

Leonard—he would figure at length in a newspaper report, but that evening he did not count for much. The foot of the tree was in shadow, since the moon was still hidden behind the house. But above, to right, to left, down the long meadow the moonlight was streaming. Leonard seemed not a man, but a cause.

Perhaps it was Helen's way of falling in love—a curious way to Margaret, whose agony and whose contempt of Henry were yet imprinted with his image. Helen forgot people. They were husks that had enclosed her emotion. She could pity, or sacrifice herself, or have instincts, but had she ever loved in the noblest way, where man and woman, having lost themselves in sex, desire to lose sex itself in comradeship?

Margaret wondered, but said no word of blame. This was Helen's evening. Troubles enough lay ahead of her—the loss of friends and of social advantages, the agony, the supreme agony, of motherhood, which is even yet not a matter of common knowledge. For the present let the moon shine brightly and the breezes of the spring blow gently, dying away from the gale of the day, and let the earth, who brings increase, bring peace. Not even to herself dare she blame Helen. She could not assess her trespass by any moral code; it was everything or nothing. Morality can tell us that murder is worse than stealing, and group most sins in an order all must approve, but it cannot group Helen. The surer its pronouncements on this point, the surer may we be that morality is not speaking. Christ was evasive when they questioned Him. It is those that cannot connect who hasten to cast the first stone.

This was Helen's evening—won at what cost, and not to be marred by the sorrows of others. Of her own tragedy Margaret never uttered a word.

'One isolates,' said Helen slowly. 'I isolated Mr Wilcox from the other forces that were pulling Leonard downhill. Consequently, I was full of pity, and almost of revenge. For weeks I had blamed Mr Wilcox only, and so, when your letters came—'

'I need never have written them,' sighed Margaret. 'They never shielded Henry. How hopeless it is to tidy away the past, even for others!'

'I did not know that it was your own idea to dismiss the Basts.'

'Looking back, that was wrong of me.'

'Looking back, darling, I know that it was right. It is right to save the man whom one loves. I am less enthusiastic about justice now. But we both thought you wrote at his dictation. It seemed the last touch of his callousness. Being very much wrought up by this time—and Mrs Bast was upstairs. I had not seen her, and had talked for a long time to Leonard—I had snubbed him for no reason, and that should have warned me I was in danger. So when the notes came I wanted us to go to you for an explanation. He said that he guessed the explanation—he knew of it, and you mustn't know. I pressed him to tell me. He said no one must know; it was something to do with his wife. Right up to the end we were Mr Bast and Miss Schlegel. I was going to tell him that he must be frank with me when I saw his eyes, and guessed that Mr Wilcox had ruined him in two ways, not one. I drew him to me. I made him tell me. I felt very lonely myself. He is not to blame. He would have gone on worshipping me. I want never to see him again, though it sounds appalling. I wanted to give him money and feel finished. Oh, Meg, the little that is known about these things!'

She laid her face against the tree.

'The little, too, that is known about growth! Both times it was loneliness, and the night, and panic afterwards. Did Leonard grow out of Paul?'

Margaret did not speak for a moment. So tired was she that her attention had actually wandered to the teeth—the teeth that had been thrust into the tree's bark to medicate it. From where she sat she could see them gleam. She had been trying to count them. 'Leonard is a better growth than madness,' she said. 'I was afraid that you would react against Paul until you went over the verge.'

'I did react until I found poor Leonard. I am steady now. I shan't ever *like* your Henry, dearest Meg, or even speak kindly about him, but all that blinding hate is over. I shall never rave against Wilcoxes any more. I understand how you married him, and you will now be very happy.'

Margaret did not reply.

'Yes,' repeated Helen, her voice growing more tender, 'I do at last understand.'

'Except Mrs Wilcox, dearest, no one understands our little movements.'

'Because in death—I agree.'

‘Not quite. I feel that you and I and Henry are only fragments of that woman’s mind. She knows everything. She is everything. She is the house, and the tree that leans over it. People have their own deaths as well as their own lives, and even if there is nothing beyond death we shall differ in our nothingness. I cannot believe that knowledge such as hers will perish with knowledge such as mine. She knew about realities. She knew when people were in love, though she was not in the room. I don’t doubt that she knew when Henry deceived her.’

‘Good night, Mrs Wilcox,’ called a voice.

‘Oh, good night, Miss Avery.’

‘Why should Miss Avery work for us?’ Helen murmured.

‘Why, indeed?’

Miss Avery crossed the lawn and merged into the hedge that divided it from the farm. An old gap, which Mr Wilcox had filled up, had reappeared, and her track through the dew followed the path that he had turfed over, when he improved the garden and made it possible for games.

‘This is not quite our house yet,’ said Helen. ‘When Miss Avery called, I felt we are only a couple of tourists.’

‘We shall be that everywhere, and for ever.’

‘But affectionate tourists—’

‘But tourists who pretend each hotel is their home.’

‘I can’t pretend very long,’ said Helen. ‘Sitting under this tree one forgets, but I know that tomorrow I shall see the moon rise out of Germany. Not all your goodness can alter the facts of the case. Unless you will come with me.’

Margaret thought for a moment. In the past year she had grown so fond of England that to leave it was a real grief. Yet what detained her? No doubt Henry would pardon her outburst, and go on blustering and muddling into a ripe old age. But what was the good? She had just as soon vanish from his mind.

‘Are you serious in asking me, Helen? Should I get on with your Monica?’

‘You would not, but I am serious in asking you.’

‘Still, no more plans now. And no more reminiscences.’

They were silent for a little. It was Helen’s evening.

The present flowed by them like a stream. The tree rustled. It had made music before they were born, and would continue after their deaths, but its song was of the moment. The moment had passed. The tree rustled again. Their senses were sharpened, and they seemed to apprehend life. Life passed. The tree rustled again.

‘Sleep now,’ said Margaret.

The peace of the country was entering into her. It has no commerce with memory, and little with hope. Least of all is it concerned with the hopes of the next five minutes. It is the peace of the present, which passes understanding. Its murmur came ‘now’, and ‘now’ once more as they trod the gravel, and ‘now’ as the moonlight fell upon their father’s sword. They passed upstairs, kissed, and amidst the endless iterations fell asleep. The house had enshadowed the tree at first, but as the moon rose higher the two disentangled, and were clear for a few moments at midnight. Margaret awoke and looked into the garden. How incomprehensible that Leonard Bast should have won her this night of peace! Was he also part of Mrs Wilcox’s mind?

XLI

FAR DIFFERENT WAS LEONARD’S development. The months after Oniton, whatever minor troubles they might bring him, were all overshadowed by Remorse. When Helen looked back she could philosophize, or she could look into the future and plan for her child. But the father saw nothing beyond his own sin. Weeks afterwards, in the midst of other occupations, he would suddenly cry out, ‘Brute—you brute, I couldn’t have—’ and be rent into two people who held dialogues. Or brown rain would descend, blotting out faces and the sky. Even Jacky noticed the change in him. Most terrible were his sufferings when he awoke from sleep. Sometimes he was happy at first, but grew conscious of a burden hanging to him and weighing down his thoughts when they would move. Or little irons scorched his body. Or a sword stabbed him. He would sit at the edge of his bed, holding his heart and moaning, ‘Oh, what *shall* I do, what ever *shall* I do?’ Nothing brought ease. He could put distance between him and the trespass, but it grew in his soul.

Remorse is not among the eternal verities. The Greeks were right to dethrone her. Her action is too capricious, as though the Erinyes[1] selected for punishment only certain men and certain sins. And of all means to regeneration Remorse is surely the most wasteful. It cuts away healthy tissues with the poisoned. It is a knife that probes far deeper than the evil. Leonard was driven straight through its torments and emerged pure, but enfeebled—a better man, who would never lose control of himself again, but also a smaller man, who had less to control. Nor did purity mean peace. The use of the knife can become a habit as hard to shake off as passion itself, and Leonard continued to start with a cry out of dreams.

He built up a situation that was far enough from the truth. It never occurred to him that Helen was to blame. He forgot the intensity of their talk, the charm that had been lent him by sincerity, the magic of Oniton under darkness and of the whispering river. Helen loved the absolute. Leonard had been ruined absolutely, and had

appeared to her as a man apart, isolated from the world. A real man, who cared for adventure and beauty, who desired to live decently and pay his way, who could have travelled more gloriously through life than the Juggernaut car[2] that was crushing him. Memories of Evie's wedding had warped her, the starched servants, the yards of uneaten food, the rustle of overdressed women, motor-cars oozing grease on the gravel, rubbish from a pretentious band. She had tasted the lees of this on her arrival; in the darkness, after failure, they intoxicated her. She and the victim seemed alone in a world of unreality, and she loved him absolutely, perhaps for half an hour.

In the morning she was gone. The note that she left, tender and hysterical in tone, and intended to be most kind, hurt her lover terribly. It was as if some work of art had been broken by him, some picture in the National Gallery slashed out of its frame. When he recalled her talents and her social position, he felt that the first passer-by had a right to shoot him down. He was afraid of the waitress and the porters at the railway station. He was afraid at first of his wife, though later he was to regard her with a strange new tenderness, and to think: 'There is nothing to choose between us, after all.'

The expedition to Shropshire crippled the Basts permanently. Helen in her flight forgot to settle the hotel bill, and took their return tickets away with her; they had to pawn Jacky's bangles to get home, and the smash came a few days afterwards. It is true that Helen offered him five thousand pounds, but such a sum meant nothing to him. He could not see that the girl was desperately righting herself, and trying to save something out of the disaster, if it was only five thousand pounds. But he had to live somehow. He turned to his family, and degraded himself to a professional beggar. There was nothing else for him to do.

'A letter from Leonard,' thought Blanche, his sister; 'and after all this time.' She hid it, so that her husband should not see, and when he had gone to his work read it with some emotion, and sent the prodigal a little money out of her dress allowance.

'A letter from Leonard!' said the other sister Laura, a few days later. She showed it to her husband. He wrote a cruel, insolent reply, but sent more money than Blanche, so Leonard soon wrote to him again.

And during the winter the system was developed. Leonard realized that they need never starve, because it would be too painful for his relatives. Society is based on the family, and the clever wastrel can exploit this indefinitely. Without a generous thought on either side, pounds and pounds passed. The donors disliked Leonard, and he grew to hate them intensely. When Laura censured his immoral marriage he thought bitterly: 'She minds that! What would she say if she knew the truth?' When Blanche's husband offered him work, he found some pretext for avoiding it. He had wanted work keenly at Oniton, but too much anxiety had shattered him, he was joining the unemployable. When his brother, the lay-reader, did not reply to a letter, he wrote again, saying that he and Jacky would come down to his village on foot. He did not intend this as blackmail. Still, the brother sent a postal order, and it became part of the system. And so passed his winter and his spring.

In the horror there are two bright spots. He never confused the past. He remained alive, and blessed are those who live, if it is only to sense of sinfulness. The anodyne of muddledom, by which most men blur and blend their mistakes, never passed Leonard's lips—

And if I drink oblivion of a day,
So shorten I the stature of my soul.[3]

It is a hard saying, and a hard man wrote it, but it lies at the root of all character.

And the other bright spot was his tenderness for Jacky. He pitied her with nobility now—not the contemptuous pity of a man who sticks to a woman through thick and thin. He tried to be less irritable. He wondered what her hungry eyes desired—nothing that she could express, or that he or any man could give her. Would she ever receive the justice that is mercy—the justice for by-products that the world is too busy to bestow? She was fond of flowers, generous with money, and not revengeful. If she had borne him a child he might have cared for her. Unmarried, Leonard would never have begged; he would have flickered out and died. But the whole of life is mixed. He had to provide for Jacky, and went down dirty paths that she might have a few feathers and the dishes of food that suited her.

One day he caught sight of Margaret and her brother. He was in St Paul's. He had entered the cathedral partly to avoid the rain and partly to see a picture that had educated him in former years. But the light was bad, the picture ill-placed, and Time and Judgement were inside him now. Death alone still charmed him, with her lap of poppies, on which all men shall sleep. He took one glance, and turned aimlessly away towards a chair. Then down the nave he saw Miss Schlegel and her brother. They stood in the fairway of passengers, and their faces were extremely grave. He was perfectly certain that they were in trouble about their sister.

Once outside—and he fled immediately—he wished that he had spoken to them. What was his life? What were a few angry words, or even imprisonment? He had done wrong—that was true terror. Whatever they might know, he would tell them everything he knew. He re-entered St Paul's. But they had moved in his absence, and had gone to lay their difficulties before Mr Wilcox and Charles.

The sight of Margaret turned remorse into new channels. He desired to confess, and though the desire is proof of a weakened nature, which is about to lose the essence of human intercourse, it did not take an ignoble form. He did not suppose that confession would bring him happiness. It was rather that he yearned to get clear of the tangle. So does the suicide yearn. The impulses are akin, and the crime of suicide lies rather in its disregard for the feelings of those whom we leave behind. Confession need harm to no one—it can satisfy that test—and though it

was un-English, and ignored by our Anglican cathedral, Leonard had a right to decide upon it.

Moreover, he trusted Margaret. He wanted her hardness now. That cold, intellectual nature of hers would be just, if unkind. He would do whatever she told him, even if he had to see Helen. That was the supreme punishment she could exact. And perhaps she would tell him how Helen was. That was the supreme reward.

He knew nothing about Margaret, not even whether she was married to Mr Wilcox, and tracking her out took several days. That evening he toiled through the wet to Wickham Place, where the new flats were now appearing. Was he also the cause of their move? Were they expelled from society on his account? Thence to a public library, but could find no satisfactory Schlegel in the directory. On the morrow he searched again. He hung about outside Mr Wilcox's office at lunch-time, and, as the clerks came out said: 'Excuse me, sir, but is your boss married?' Most of them stared, some said, 'What's that to you?' but one, who had not yet acquired reticence, told him what he wished. Leonard could not learn the private address. That necessitated more trouble with directories and tubes. Ducie Street was not discovered till the Monday, the day that Margaret and her husband went down on their hunting expedition to Howards End.

He called at about four o'clock. The weather had changed, and the sun shone gaily on the ornamental steps—black and white marble in triangles. Leonard lowered his eyes to them after ringing the bell. He felt in curious health: doors seemed to be opening and shutting inside his body, and he had been obliged to sleep sitting up in bed, with his back propped against the wall. When the parlourmaid came he could not see her face; the brown rain had descended suddenly.

'Does Mrs Wilcox live here?' he asked.

'She's out,' was the answer.

'When will she be back?'

'I'll ask,' said the parlourmaid.

Margaret had given instructions that no one who mentioned her name should ever be rebuffed. Putting the door on the chain—for Leonard's appearance demanded this—she went through to the smoking-room, which was occupied by Tibby. Tibby was asleep. He had had a good lunch. Charles Wilcox had not yet rung him up for the distracting interview. He said drowsily: 'I don't know. Hilton. Howards End. Who is it?'

'I'll ask, sir.'

'No, don't bother.'

'They have taken the car to Howards End,' said the parlourmaid to Leonard.

He thanked her, and asked whereabouts that place was.

'You appear to want to know a good deal,' she remarked. But Margaret had forbidden her to be mysterious. She told him against her better judgement that Howards End was in Hertfordshire.

'Is it a village, please?'

'Village! It's Mr Wilcox's private house—at least, it's one of them. Mrs Wilcox keeps her furniture there. Hilton is the village.'

'Yes. And when will they be back?'

'Mr Schlegel doesn't know. We can't know everything, can we?' She shut him out, and went to attend to the telephone, which was ringing furiously.

He loitered away another night of agony. Confession grew more difficult. As soon as possible he went to bed. He watched a patch of moonlight cross the floor of their lodging, and, as sometimes happens when the mind is overtaxed, he fell asleep for the rest of the room, but kept awake for the patch of moonlight. Horrible! Then began one of those disintegrating dialogues. Part of him said: 'Why horrible? It's ordinary light from the moon.' 'But it moves.' 'So does the moon.' 'But it is a clenched fist.' 'Why not?' 'But it is going to touch me.' 'Let it.' And, seeming to gather motion, the patch ran up his blanket. Presently a blue snake appeared; then another, parallel to it. 'Is there life in the moon?' 'Of course.' 'But I thought it was uninhabited.' 'Not by Time, Death, Judgement and the smaller snakes.' 'Smaller snakes!' said Leonard indignantly and aloud. 'What a notion!' By a rending effort of the will he woke the rest of the room up. Jacky, the bed, their food, their clothes on the chair, gradually entered his consciousness, and the horror vanished outwards, like a ring that is spreading through water.

'I say, Jacky, I'm going out for a bit.'

She was breathing regularly. The patch of light fell clear of the striped blanket, and began to cover the shawl that lay over her feet. Why had he been afraid? He went to the window, and saw that the moon was descending through a clear sky. He saw her volcanoes, and the bright expanses that a gracious error has named seas. They paled, for the sun, who had lit them up, was coming to light the earth. Sea of Serenity, Sea of Tranquillity, Ocean of the Lunar Storms, merged into one lucent drop, itself to slip into the sempiternal dawn. And he had been afraid of the moon!

He dressed among the contending lights, and went through his money. It was running low again, but enough for a return ticket to Hilton. As it clinked Jacky opened her eyes.

'Hullo, Len! What ho, Len!'

'What ho, Jacky! See you again later.'

She turned over and slept.

The house was unlocked, their landlord being a salesman at Covent Garden. Leonard passed out and made his way down to the station. The train, though it did not start for an hour, was already drawn up at the end of the platform, and he lay down in it and slept. With the first jolt he was in daylight; they had left the gateways of

King's Cross, and were under blue sky. Tunnels followed, and after each the sky grew bluer, and from the embankment at Finsbury Park he had his first sight of the sun. It rolled along behind the eastern smokes—a wheel, whose fellow was the descending moon—and as yet it seemed the servant of the blue sky, not its lord. He dozed again. Over Tewin Water it was day. To the left fell the shadow of the embankment and its arches; to the right Leonard saw up into the Tewin woods and towards the church, with its wild legend of immortality. Six forest trees —that is a fact—grow out of one of the graves in Tewin churchyard. The grave's occupant—that is the leg-end—is an atheist, who declared that if God existed six forest trees would grow out of her grave. These things in Hertfordshire; and further afield lay the house of a hermit—Mrs Wilcox had known him—who barred himself up, and wrote prophecies, and gave all he had to the poor. While, powdered in between, were the villas of businessmen, who saw life more steadily, though with the steadiness of the half-closed eye. Over all the sun was streaming, to all the birds were singing, to all the primroses were yellow, and the speedwell blue, and the country, however they interpreted her, was uttering her cry of 'now'. She did not free Leonard yet, and the knife plunged deeper into his heart as the train drew up at Hilton. But remorse had become beautiful.

Hilton was asleep or, at the earliest, breakfasting. Leonard noticed the contrast when he stepped out of it into the country. Here men had been up since dawn. Their hours were ruled, not by a London office, but by the movements of the crops and the sun. That they were men of the finest type only the sentimentalist can declare. But they kept to the life of daylight. They are England's hope. Clumsily they carry forward the torch of the sun, until such time as the nation sees fit to take it up. Half clodhopper, half board-school prig, they can still throw back to a nobler stock, and breed yeomen.

At the chalk-pit a motor passed him. In it was another type whom Nature favours—the Imperial. Healthy, ever in motion, it hopes to inherit the earth. It breeds as quickly as the yeoman, and as soundly; strong is the temptation to acclaim it as a super-yeoman, who carries his country's virtue overseas. But the Imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled the earth that he inherits will be gray.

To Leonard, intent on his private sin, there came the conviction of innate goodness elsewhere. It was not the optimism which he had been taught at school. Again and again must the drums tap and the goblins stalk over the universe before joy can be purged of the superficial. It was rather paradoxical, and arose from his sorrow. Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him—that is the best account of it that has yet been given. Squalor and tragedy can beckon to all that is great in us, and strengthen the wings of love. They can beckon; it is not certain that they will, for they are not love's servants. But they can beckon, and the knowledge of this incredible truth comforted him.

As he approached the house all thought stopped. Contradictory notions stood side by side in his mind. He was terrified but happy, ashamed, but had done no sin. He knew the confession: 'Mrs Wilcox, I have done wrong,' but sunrise had robbed its meaning, and he felt rather on a supreme adventure.

He entered a garden, steadied himself against a motor-car that he found in it, found a door open and entered a house. Yes, it would be very easy. From a room to the left he heard voices, Margaret's amongst them. His own name was called aloud, and a man whom he had never seen said, 'Oh, is he there? I am not surprised. I now thrash him within an inch of his life.'

'Mrs Wilcox,' said Leonard, 'I have done wrong.'

The man took him by the collar and cried, 'Bring me a stick.' Women were screaming. A stick, very bright, descended. It hurt him, not where it descended, but in the heart. Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense.

'Get some water,' commanded Charles, who had all through kept very calm. 'He's shamming. Of course I only used the blade. Here, carry him out into the air.'

Thinking that he understood these things, Margaret obeyed him. They laid Leonard, who was dead, on the gravel; Helen poured water over him.

'That's enough,' said Charles.

'Yes, murder's enough,' said Miss Avery, coming out of the house with the sword.

XLII

When Charles left Ducie Street he had caught the first train home, but had no inkling of the newest development until late at night. Then his father, who had dined alone, sent for him, and in very grave tones inquired for Margaret.

'I don't know where she is, pater,' said Charles. 'Dolly kept back dinner nearly an hour for her.'

'Tell me when she comes in.'

Another hour passed. The servants went to bed, and Charles visited his father again, to receive further instructions. Mrs Wilcox had still not returned.

'I'll sit up for her as late as you like, but she can hardly be coming. Isn't she stopping with her sister at the

hotel?'

'Perhaps,' said Mr Wilcox thoughtfully—'perhaps.'

'Can I do anything for you, sir?'

'Not tonight, my boy.'

Mr Wilcox liked being called sir. He raised his eyes and gave his son more open a look of tenderness than he usually ventured. He saw Charles as little boy and strong man in one. Though his wife had proved unstable his children were left to him.

After midnight he tapped on Charles's door. 'I can't sleep,' he said. 'I had better have a talk with you and get it over.'

He complained of the heat. Charles took him out into the garden, and they paced up and down in their dressing-gowns. Charles became very quiet as the story unrolled; he had known all along that Margaret was as bad as her sister.

'She will feel differently in the morning,' said Mr Wilcox, who had of course said nothing about Mrs Bast. 'But I cannot let this kind of thing continue without comment. I am morally certain that she is with her sister at Howards End. The house is mine—and, Charles, it will be yours—and when I say that no one is to live there I mean that no one is to live there. I won't have it.' He looked angrily at the moon. 'To my mind this question is connected with something far greater, the rights of property itself.'

'Undoubtedly,' said Charles.

Mr Wilcox linked his arm in his son's, but somehow liked him less as he told him more. 'I don't want you to conclude that my wife and I had anything of the nature of a quarrel. She was only overwrought, as who would not be? I shall do what I can for Helen, but on the understanding that they clear out of the house at once. Do you see? That is a *sine qua non*.'[1]

'Then at eight tomorrow I may go up in the car?'

'Eight or earlier. Say that you are acting as my representative, and, of course, use no violence, Charles.'

On the morrow, as Charles returned, leaving Leonard dead upon the gravel, it did not seem to him that he had used violence. Death was due to heart-disease. His stepmother herself had said so, and even Miss Avery had acknowledged that he only used the flat of the sword. On his way through the village he informed the police, who thanked him, and said there must be an inquest. He found his father in the garden shading his eyes from the sun.

'It has been pretty horrible,' said Charles gravely. 'They were there, and they had the man up there with them too.'

'What—what man?'

'I told you last night. His name was Bast.'

'My God! Is it possible?' said Mr Wilcox. 'In your mother's house! Charles, in your mother's house!'

'I know, pater. That was what I felt. As a matter of fact, there is no need to trouble about the man. He was in the last stages of heart-disease, and just before I could show him what I thought of him he went off. The police are seeing about it at this moment.'

Mr Wilcox listened attentively.

'I got up there—oh, it couldn't have been more than half past seven. The Avery woman was lighting a fire for them. They were still upstairs. I waited in the drawing-room. We were all moderately civil and collected, though I had my suspicions. I gave them your message, and Mrs Wilcox said, "Oh yes, I see; yes," in that way of hers.'

'Nothing else?'

'I promised to tell you, "with her love", that she was going to Germany with her sister this evening. That was all we had time for.'

Mr Wilcox seemed relieved.

'Because by then I suppose the man got tired of hiding, for suddenly Mrs Wilcox screamed out his name. I recognized it, and went for him in the hall. Was I right, pater? I thought things were going a little too far.'

'Right, my dear boy? I don't know. But you would have been no son of mine if you hadn't. Then did he just—just—crumple up as you said?' He shrank from the simple word.

'He caught hold of the bookcase, which came down over him. So I merely put the sword down and carried him into the garden. We all thought he was shamming. However, he's dead right enough. Awful business!'

'Sword?' cried his father, with anxiety in his voice. 'What sword? Whose sword?'

'A sword of theirs.'

'What were you doing with it?'

'Well, didn't you see, pater, I had to snatch up the first thing handy. I hadn't a riding-whip or stick. I caught him once or twice over the shoulders with the flat of their old German sword.'

'Then what?'

'He pulled over the bookcase, as I said, and fell,' said Charles, with a sigh. It was no fun doing errands for his father, who was never quite satisfied.

'But the real cause was heart-disease? Of that you're sure?'

'That or a fit. However, we shall hear more than enough at the inquest on such unsavoury topics.'

They went in to breakfast. Charles had a racking headache, consequent on motoring before food. He was also anxious about the future, reflecting that the police must detain Helen and Margaret for the inquest and ferret the whole thing out. He saw himself obliged to leave Hilton. One could not afford to live near the scene of a scandal—

it was not fair on one's wife. His comfort was that the pater's eyes were opened at last. There would be a horrible smash-up, and probably a separation from Margaret; then they would all start again, more as they had been in his mother's time.

'I think I'll go round to the police-station,' said his father when breakfast was over.

'What for?' cried Dolly, who had still not been 'told'.

'Very well, sir. Which car will you have?'

'I think I'll walk.'

'It's a good half-mile,' said Charles, stepping into the garden. 'The sun's very hot for April. Shan't I take you up, and then, perhaps, a little spin round by Tewin?'

'You go on as if I didn't know my own mind,' said Mr Wilcox fretfully. Charles hardened his mouth. 'You young fellows' one idea is to get into a motor. I tell you, I want to walk; I'm very fond of walking.'

'Oh, all right; I'm about the house if you want me for anything. I thought of not going up to the office today, if that is your wish.'

'It is, indeed, my boy,' said Mr Wilcox, and laid a hand on his sleeve.

Charles did not like it; he was uneasy about his father, who did not seem himself this morning. There was a petulant touch about him—more like a woman. Could it be that he was growing old? The Wilcoxes were not lacking in affection; they had it royally, but they did not know how to use it. It was the talent in the napkin, and, for a warm-hearted man, Charles had conveyed very little joy. As he watched his father shuffling up the road, he had a vague regret—a wish that something had been different somewhere—a wish (though he did not express it thus) that he had been taught to say 'I' in his youth. He meant to make up for Margaret's defection, but knew that his father had been very happy with her until yesterday. How had she done it? By some dishonest trick, no doubt—but how?

Mr Wilcox reappeared at eleven, looking very tired. There was to be an inquest on Leonard's body tomorrow, and the police required his son to attend.

'I expected that,' said Charles. 'I shall naturally be the most important witness there.'

XLIII

Out of the turmoil and horror that had begun with Aunt Juley's illness and was not even to end with Leonard's death, it seemed impossible to Margaret that healthy life should re-emerge. Events succeeded in a logical, yet senseless, train. People lost their humanity, and took values as arbitrary as those in a pack of playing-cards. It was natural that Henry should do this and cause Helen to do that, and then think her wrong for doing it; natural that she herself should think him wrong; natural that Leonard should want to know how Helen was, and come, and Charles be angry with him for coming—natural, but unreal. In this jangle of causes and effects what had become of their true selves? Here Leonard lay dead in the garden, from natural causes; yet life was a deep, deep river, death a blue sky, life was a house, death a wisp of hay, a flower, a tower, life and death were anything and everything, except this ordered insanity, where the king takes the queen, and the ace the king. Ah, no; there was beauty and adventure behind, such as the man at her feet had yearned for; there was hope this side of the grave; there were truer relationships beyond the limits that fetter us now. As a prisoner looks up and sees stars beckoning, so she, from the turmoil and horror of those days, caught glimpses of the diviner wheels.

And Helen, dumb with fright, but trying to keep calm for the child's sake, and Miss Avery, calm, but murmuring tenderly, 'No one ever told the lad he'll have a child'—they also reminded her that horror is not the end. To what ultimate harmony we tend she did not know, but there seemed great chance that a child would be born into the world, to take the great chances of beauty and adventure that the world offers. She moved through the sunlit garden, gathering narcissi, crimson-eyed and white. There was nothing else to be done; the time for telegrams and anger was over, and it seemed wisest that the hands of Leonard should be folded on his breast and be filled with flowers. Here was the father; leave it at that. Let squalor be turned into tragedy, whose eyes are the stars, and whose hands hold the sunset and the dawn.

And even the influx of officials, even the return of the doctor, vulgar and acute, could not shake her belief in the eternity of beauty. Science explained people, but could not understand them. After long centuries among the bones and muscles it might be advancing to knowledge of the nerves, but this would never give understanding. One could open the heart to Mr Mansbridge and his sort without discovering its secrets to them, for they wanted everything down in black and white, and black and white was exactly what they were left with.

They questioned her closely about Charles. She never suspected why. Death had come, and the doctor agreed that it was due to heart-disease. They asked to see her father's sword. She explained that Charles's anger was natural, but mistaken. Miserable questions about Leonard followed, all of which she answered unfalteringly. Then back to Charles again. 'No doubt Mr Wilcox may have induced death,' she said; 'but if it wasn't one thing it would have been another, as you yourselves know.' At last they thanked her, and took the sword and the body down to Hilton. She began to pick up the books from the floor.

Helen had gone to the farm. It was the best place for her, since she had to wait for the inquest. Though, as if things were not hard enough, Madge and her husband had raised trouble; they did not see why they should receive the off-scourings of Howards End. And, of course, they were right. The whole world was going to be right, and amply avenge any brave talk against the conventions. 'Nothing matters,' the Schlegels had said in the past, 'except one's self-respect and that of one's friends.' When the time came, other things mattered terribly. However, Madge had yielded, and Helen was assured of peace for one day and night, and tomorrow she would return to Germany.

As for herself, she determined to go too. No message came from Henry; perhaps he expected her to apologize. Now that she had time to think over her own tragedy, she was unrepentant. She neither forgave him for his behaviour nor wished to forgive him. Her speech to him seemed perfect. She would not have altered a word. It had to be uttered once in a life, to adjust the lopsidedness of the world. It was spoken not only to her husband, but to thousands of men like him—a protest against the inner darkness in high places that comes with a commercial age. Though he would build up his life without her, she could not apologize. He had refused to connect, on the clearest issue that can be laid before a man, and their love must take the consequences.

No, there was nothing more to be done. They had tried not to go over the precipice, but perhaps the fall was inevitable. And it comforted her to think that the future was certainly inevitable: cause and effect would go jangling forward to some goal doubtless, but to none that she could imagine. At such moments the soul retires within, to float upon the bosom of a deeper stream, and has communion with the dead, and sees the world's glory not diminished, but different in kind to what she has supposed. She alters her focus until trivial things are blurred. Margaret had been tending this way all the winter. Leonard's death brought her to the goal. Alas! that Henry should fade away as reality emerged, and only her love for him should remain clear, stamped with his image like the cameos we rescue out of dreams.

With unfaltering eye she traced his future. He would soon present a healthy mind to the world again, and what did he or the world care if he was rotten at the core? He would grow into a rich, jolly old man, at times a little sentimental about women, but emptying his glass with anyone. Tenacious of power, he would keep Charles and the rest dependent, and retire from business reluctantly and at an advanced age. He would settle down—though she could not realize this. In her eyes Henry was always moving and causing others to move, until the ends of the earth met. But in time he must get too tired to move, and settle down. What next? The inevitable word. The release of the soul to its appropriate Heaven.

Would they meet in it? Margaret believed in immortality for herself. An eternal future had always seemed natural to her. And Henry believed in it for himself. Yet would they meet again? Are there not rather endless levels beyond the grave, as the theory that he had censured teaches? And his level, whether higher or lower, could it possibly be the same as hers?

Thus gravely meditating, she was summoned by him. He sent up Crane in the motor. Other servants passed like water, but the chauffeur remained, though impertinent and disloyal. Margaret disliked Crane, and he knew it.

'Is it the keys that Mr Wilcox wants?' she asked.

'He didn't say, madam.'

'You haven't any note for me?'

'He didn't say, madam.'

After a moment's thought she locked up Howards End. It was pitiable to see in it the stirrings of warmth that would be quenched for ever. She raked out the fire that was blazing in the kitchen, and spread the coals in the gravelled yard. She closed the windows and drew the curtains. Henry would probably sell the place now.

She was determined not to spare him, for nothing new had happened as far as they were concerned. Her mood might never have altered from yesterday evening. He was standing a little outside Charles's gate, and motioned the car to stop. When his wife got out he said hoarsely: 'I prefer to discuss things with you outside.'

'It will be more appropriate in the road, I am afraid,' said Margaret. 'Did you get my message?'

'What about?'

'I am going to Germany with my sister. I must tell you now that I shall make it my permanent home. Our talk last night was more important than you have realized. I am unable to forgive you and am leaving you.'

'I am extremely tired,' said Henry, in injured tones. 'I have been walking about all the morning, and wish to sit down.'

'Certainly, if you will consent to sit on the grass.'

The Great North Road should have been bordered all its length with glebe. Henry's kind had filched most of it. She moved to the scrap opposite, wherein were the Six Hills. They sat down on the further side, so that they could not be seen by Charles or Dolly.

'Here are your keys,' said Margaret. She tossed them towards him. They fell on the sunlit slope of grass, and he did not pick them up.

'I have something to tell you,' he said gently.

She knew this superficial gentleness, this confession of hastiness, that was only intended to enhance her admiration of the male.

'I don't want to hear it,' she replied. 'My sister is going to be ill. My life is going to be with her now. We must manage to build up something, she and I and her child.'

'Where are you going?'

'Munich. We start after the inquest, if she is not too ill.'

‘After the inquest?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you realized what the verdict at the inquest will be?’

‘Yes, heart-disease.’

‘No, my dear; manslaughter.’

Margaret drove her fingers through the grass. The hill beneath her moved as if it was alive.

‘Manslaughter,’ repeated Mr Wilcox. ‘Charles may go to prison. I dare not tell him. I don’t know what to do—what to do. I’m broken—I’m ended.’

No sudden warmth arose in her. She did not see that to break him was her only hope. She did not enfold the sufferer in her arms. But all through that day and the next a new life began to move. The verdict was brought in. Charles was committed for trial. It was against all reason that he should be punished, but the law, being made in his image, sentenced him to three years’ imprisonment. Then Henry’s fortress gave way. He could bear no one but his wife, he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him. She did what seemed easiest—she took him down to recruit at Howards End.

XLIV

TOM’S FATHER WAS CUTTING the big meadow. He passed again and again amid whirring blades and sweet odours of grass, encompassing with narrowing circles the sacred centre of the field. Tom was negotiating with Helen.

‘I haven’t any idea,’ she replied. ‘Do you suppose baby may, Meg?’

Margaret put down her work and regarded them absently. ‘What was that?’ she asked.

‘Tom wants to know whether baby is old enough to play with hay?’

‘I haven’t the least notion,’ answered Margaret, and took up her work again.

‘Now, Tom, baby is not to stand; he is not to lie on his face; he is not to lie so that his head wags; he is not to be teased or tickled; and he is not to be cut into two or more pieces by the cutter. Will you be as careful as all that?’

Tom held out his arms.

‘That child is a wonderful nursemaid,’ remarked Margaret.

‘He is fond of baby. That’s why he does it!’ was Helen’s answer. ‘They’re going to be lifelong friends.’

‘Starting at the ages of six and one?’

‘Of course. It will be a great thing for Tom.’

‘It may be a greater thing for baby.’

Fourteen months had passed, but Margaret still stopped at Howards End. No better plan had occurred to her. The meadow was being re-cut, the great red poppies were reopening in the garden. July would follow with the little red poppies among the wheat, August with the cutting of the wheat. These little events would become part of her, year after year. Every summer she would fear lest the well should give out, every winter lest the pipes should freeze; every westerly gale might blow the wych-elm down and bring the end of all things, and so she could not read or talk during a westerly gale. The air was tranquil now. She and her sister were sitting on the remains of Evie’s rockery, where the lawn merged into the field.

‘What a time they all are!’ said Helen. ‘What can they be doing inside?’ Margaret, who was growing less talkative, made no answer. The noise of the cutter came intermittently, like the breaking of waves. Close by them a man was preparing to scythe out one of the dell-holes.

‘I wish Henry was out to enjoy this,’ said Helen. ‘This lovely weather and to be shut up in the house! It’s very hard.’

‘It has to be,’ said Margaret. ‘The hay fever is his chief objection against living here, but he thinks it worth while.’

‘Meg, is or isn’t he ill? I can’t make out.’

‘Not ill. Eternally tired. He has worked very hard all his life, and noticed nothing. Those are the people who collapse when they do notice a thing.’

‘I suppose he worries dreadfully about his part of the tangle.’

‘Dreadfully. That is why I wish Dolly had not come, too, today. Still, he wanted them all to come. It has to be.’

‘Why does he want them?’

Margaret did not answer.

‘Meg, may I tell you something? I like Henry.’

‘You’d be odd if you didn’t,’ said Margaret.

‘I usen’t to.’

‘Usen’t!’ She lowered her eyes a moment to the black abyss of the past. They had crossed it, always excepting Leonard and Charles. They were building up a new life, obscure, yet gilded with tranquillity. Leonard was dead; Charles had two years more in prison. One usen’t always to see clearly before that time. It was different now.

‘I like Henry because he does worry.’

‘And he likes you because you don’t.’

Helen sighed. She seemed humiliated, and buried her face in her hands. After a time she said: ‘About love’—a transition less abrupt than it appeared.

Margaret never stopped working.

‘I mean a woman’s love for a man. I supposed I should hang my life onto that once, and was driven up and down and about as if something was worrying through me. But everything is peaceful now; I seem cured. That Herr Förstmeister, whom Frieda keeps writing about, must be a noble character, but he doesn’t see that I shall never marry him or anyone. It isn’t shame or mistrust of myself. I simply couldn’t. I’m ended. I used to be so dreamy about a man’s love as a girl, and think that for good or evil love must be the great thing. But it hasn’t been; it has been itself a dream. Do you agree?’

‘I do not agree. I do not.’

‘I ought to remember Leonard as my lover,’ said Helen, stepping down into the field. ‘I tempted him, and killed him, and it is surely the least I can do. I would like to throw out all my heart to Leonard on such an afternoon as this. But I cannot. It is no good pretending. I am forgetting him.’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘How nothing seems to match—how, my darling, my precious—’ She broke off. ‘Tommy!’

‘Yes, please?’

‘Baby’s not to try and stand—there’s something wanting in me. I see you loving Henry, and understanding him better daily, and I know that death wouldn’t part you in the least. But I—is it some awful, appalling criminal defect?’

Margaret silenced her. She said: ‘It is only that people are far more different than is pretended. All over the world men and women are worrying because they cannot develop as they are supposed to develop. Here and there they have the matter out, and it comforts them. Don’t fret yourself, Helen. Develop what you have; love your child. I do not love children. I am thankful to have none. I can play with their beauty and charm, but that is all—nothing real, not one scrap of what there ought to be. And others—others go further still, and move outside humanity altogether. A place, as well as a person, may catch the glow. Don’t you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences—eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour; sorrow perhaps, but colour in the daily gray. Then I can’t have you worrying about Leonard. Don’t drag in the personal when it will not come. Forget him.’

‘Yes, yes, but what has Leonard got out of life?’

‘Perhaps an adventure.’

‘Is that enough?’

‘Not for us. But for him.’

Helen took up a bunch of grass. She looked at the sorrel, and the red and white and yellow clover, and the quaker grass, and the daisies, and the bents that composed it. She raised it to her face.

‘Is it sweetening yet?’ asked Margaret.

‘No, only withered.’

‘It will sweeten tomorrow.’

Helen smiled. ‘Oh, Meg, you are a person,’ she said. ‘Think of the racket and torture this time last year. But now I couldn’t stop unhappy if I tried. What a change—and all through you!’

‘Oh, we merely settled down. You and Henry learned to understand one another and to forgive, all through the autumn and the winter.’

‘Yes, but who settled us down?’

Margaret did not reply. The scything had begun, and she took off her pince-nez to watch it.

‘You!’ cried Helen. ‘You did it all, sweetest, though you’re too stupid to see. Living here was your plan—I wanted you; he wanted you; and everyone said it was impossible, but you knew. Just think of our lives without you, Meg—I and baby with Monica, revolting by theory, he handed about from Dolly to Evie. But you picked up the pieces, and made us a home. Can’t it strike you—even for a moment—that your life has been heroic? Can’t you remember the two months after Charles’s arrest, when you began to act, and did all?’

‘You were both ill at the time,’ said Margaret. ‘I did the obvious things. I had two invalids to nurse. Here was a house, ready-furnished and empty. It was obvious. I didn’t know myself it would turn into a permanent home. No doubt I have done a little towards straightening the tangle, but things that I can’t phrase have helped me.’

‘I hope it will be permanent,’ said Helen, drifting away to other thoughts.

‘I think so. There are moments when I feel Howards End peculiarly our own.’

‘All the same, London’s creeping.’

She pointed over the meadow—over eight or nine meadows, but at the end of them was a red rust.

‘You see that in Surrey and even Hampshire now,’ she continued.

‘I can see it from the Purbeck downs. And London is only part of something else, I’m afraid. Life’s going to be melted down, all over the world.’

Margaret knew that her sister spoke truly. Howards End, Oniton, the Purbeck downs, the Oderberge, were all survivals, and the melting-pot was being prepared for them. Logically, they had no right to be alive. One’s hope was in the weakness of logic. Were they possibly the earth beating time?

‘Because a thing is going strong now, it need not go strong for ever,’ she said. ‘This craze for motion has only set in during the last hundred years. It may be followed by a civilization that won’t be a movement, because it will

rest on the earth. All the signs are against it now, but I can't help hoping, and very early in the morning in the garden I feel that our house is the future as well as the past.'

They turned and looked at it. Their own memories coloured it now, for Helen's child had been born in the central room of the nine. Then Margaret said, 'Oh, take care—!' for something moved behind the window of the hall, and the door opened.

'The conclave's breaking at last. I'll go.'

It was Paul.

Helen retreated with the children far into the field. Friendly voices greeted her. Margaret rose, to encounter a man with a heavy black moustache.

'My father has asked for you,' he said with hostility.

She took her work and followed him.

'We have been talking business,' he continued, 'but I daresay you knew all about it beforehand.'

'Yes, I did.'

Clumsy of movement—for he had spent all his life in the saddle—Paul drove his foot against the paint of the front door. Mrs Wilcox gave a little cry of annoyance. She did not like anything scratched; she stopped in the hall to take Dolly's boa and gloves out of a vase.

Her husband was lying in a great leather chair in the diningroom, and by his side, holding his hand rather ostentatiously, was Evie. Dolly, dressed in purple, sat near the window. The room was a little dark and airless; they were obliged to keep it like this until the carting of the hay. Margaret joined the family without speaking; the five of them had met already at tea, and she knew quite well what was going to be said. Averse to wasting her time, she went on sewing. The clock struck six.

'Is this going to suit everyone?' said Henry in a weary voice. He used the old phrases, but their effect was unexpected and shadowy. 'Because I don't want you all coming here later on and complaining that I have been unfair.'

'It's apparently got to suit us,' said Paul.

'I beg your pardon, my boy. You have only to speak, and I will leave the house to you instead.'

Paul frowned ill-temperedly, and began scratching at his arm. 'As I've given up the outdoor life that suited me, and have come home to look after the business, it's no good my settling down here,' he said at last. 'It's not really the country, and it's not the town.'

'Very well. Does my arrangement suit you, Evie?'

'Of course, father.'

'And you, Dolly?'

Dolly raised her faded little face, which sorrow could wither but not steady. 'Perfectly splendidly,' she said. 'I thought Charles wanted it for the boys, but last time I saw him he said no, because we cannot possibly live in this part of England again. Charles says we ought to change our name, but I cannot think what to, for Wilcox just suits Charles and me, and I can't think of any other name.'

There was a general silence. Dolly looked nervously round, fearing that she had been inappropriate. Paul continued to scratch his arm.

'Then I leave Howards End to my wife absolutely,' said Henry. 'And let everyone understand that; and after I am dead let there be no jealousy and no surprise.'

Margaret did not answer. There was something uncanny in her triumph. She, who had never expected to conquer anyone, had charged straight through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives.

'In consequence, I leave my wife no money,' said Henry. 'That is her own wish. All that she would have had will be divided among you. I am also giving you a great deal in my lifetime, so that you may be independent of me. That is her wish, too. She also is giving away a great deal of money. She intends to diminish her income by half during the next ten years; she intends when she dies to leave the house to her—to her nephew, down in the field. Is all that clear? Does everyone understand?'

Paul rose to his feet. He was accustomed to natives, and a very little shook him out of the Englishman. Feeling manly and cynical, he said: 'Down in the field? Oh, come! I think we might have had the whole establishment, piccaninnies included.'

Mrs Cahill whispered: 'Don't, Paul. You promised you'd take care.' Feeling a woman of the world, she rose and prepared to take her leave.

Her father kissed her. 'Good-bye, old girl,' he said; 'don't you worry about me.'

'Good-bye, dad.'

Then it was Dolly's turn. Anxious to contribute, she laughed nervously, and said: 'Good-bye, Mr Wilcox. It does seem curious that Mrs Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she get it, after all.'

From Evie came a sharply drawn breath. 'Good-bye,' she said to Margaret, and kissed her.

And again and again fell the word, like the ebb of a dying sea.

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Dolly.'

'So long, father.'

'Good-bye, my boy; always take care of yourself.'

'Good-bye, Mrs Wilcox.'

‘Good-bye.’

Margaret saw their visitors to the gate. Then she returned to her husband and laid her head in his hands. He was pitiably tired. But Dolly’s remark had interested her. At last she said: ‘Could you tell me, Henry, what was that about Mrs Wilcox having left me Howards End?’

Tranquilly he replied: ‘Yes, she did. But that is a very old story. When she was ill and you were so kind to her she wanted to make you some return, and, not being herself at the time, scribbled “Howards End” on a piece of paper. I went into it thoroughly, and, as it was clearly fanciful, I set it aside, little knowing what my Margaret would be to me in the future.’

Margaret was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered.

‘I didn’t do wrong, did I?’ he asked, bending down.

‘You didn’t, darling. Nothing has been done wrong.’

From the garden came laughter. ‘Here they are at last!’ exclaimed Henry, disengaging himself with a smile. Helen rushed into the gloom, holding Tom by one hand and carrying her baby on the other. There were shouts of infectious joy.

‘The field’s cut!’ Helen cried excitedly—’The big meadow! We’ve seen to the very end, and it’ll be such a crop of hay as never!’

Weybridge,
1908–1910

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Chapter II

1. The seven princes and prelates who elected the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire after 1356.
2. A well-known delivery service.
3. An architectural term, referring to a monumental gateway at Euston Station, since demolished.

Chapter III

1. An Act of Parliament in 1907 which legalized marriage between a widower and his deceased wife's sister.
2. Site of a serious railway accident in June 1866.
3. An echo of famous lines from Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade":

> *Their's not to reason why,*
> *Their's but to do and die …*

Chapter IV

1. The use of military missions to open up trade in Tibet.
2. In 1870, the army of Emperor Louis Napoleon of France was defeated by Prussia at the battle of Sedan, in the Franco-Prussian War. The way was then clear for the unification of the German principalities and cities into the modern state, under Prussia's aegis.
3. The Englishwoman.
4. The references are to the court of the princely Hungarian family Esterházy, patrons of the composer Haydn, among others, and to the capital city of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar, famous for its associations with Goethe, Schiller and many other writers.

Chapter V

1. Authentically German.
2. *Wunderschön* means 'wonderful' and *pracht* means 'splendid'.
3. Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States 1901–9.
4. Postal code indicating that the Schlegels' address was in the socially desirable West End of London.
5. Sir Edward Elgar, English composer whose "Pomp and Circumstance" marches include the tune of the patriotic song, "Land of Hope and Glory."
6. The allusion is to Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.
7. Marie Corelli (1855–1924), author of sensational and melodramatic novels.
8. A set of antique silver spoons, each of which bears a representation of one of the Twelve Apostles, with a larger spoon representing Christ.
9. Charles Ricketts (1866–1931), English artist and book illustrator.
10. A pin ornamented with quartz crystal found in the Cairngorm Mountains area of Scotland.
11. An allusion to the foolish optimist Dr Pangloss in Voltaire's satire *Candide*, who believed that 'everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'

Chapter VI

1. Painter of popular sentimental pictures.
2. George Frederick Watts, Victorian painter of portentous allegorical pictures.
3. Matthew Arnold's tribute to Sophocles, in his sonnet, "To a Friend": 'Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole.'

Chapter VII

1. An employment office where domestic servants could be hired.

Chapter VIII

1. This does not imply that she was admitted to the house. In accordance with the etiquette of the day, Mrs Wilcox would have been told the Schlegel sisters were 'not at home', and left her calling card.
2. 'Not a lady' (German).

3. A play on the title, *Cox and Box*, a popular musical adaptation by F. C. Burnand and Arthur Sullivan of J. M. Morton's farce *Box and Cox*.
4. 'The native hue of resolution' and 'the pale cast of thought' are phrases taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (3.i.84–85).
5. Eugène Ysaye (1858–1931), Belgian concert violinist.

Chapter IX

1. A real institution, founded in 1886 as a more progressive rival to the Royal Academy.
2. William Rothenstein was a member of the New English Art Club and, later, director of the Royal College of Art.
3. A port in eastern Germany, now in Poland and known as Szczecin.
4. Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), a Swiss-German painter.
5. Benjamin Williams Leader (1831–1923), a popular English landscape painter.
6. Edward MacDowell (1861–1908), American composer.

Chapter X

1. A closed, horse-drawn carriage.
2. A German idiom (literally meaning 'baked fish') for 'a young girl'.

Chapter XI

1. Alcestis was a figure in classical Greek mythology who took her own life so that her husband might live, and the subject of a play by Euripides. The funeral of Ophelia, who also committed suicide, is the occasion of the tragic climax to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
2. Protestants who refused to conform to the established Church of England.
3. 'A spare wheel for a motor vehicle, consisting of a ready-inflated tyre on a spokeless metal rim, which could be clamped temporarily over a punctured wheel' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*).

Chapter XII

1. Chief forester.
2. A small ornamental container for smelling-salts.

Chapter XIII

1. An echo of a line in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1.iv.21).

Chapter XIV

1. A novel by George Meredith, published in 1859, whose eponymous hero spends a night walking through a forest.
2. The reference is to Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94).
3. Stevenson's *Virginibus puerisque* (1881) includes a chapter on "Walking Tours."
4. English naturalist and author of books on rural subjects (1848–87).
5. George Henry Borrow (1803–81), English travel writer. His description of Stonehenge, referred to at the end of the paragraph, occurs in chapter 60 of his *Lavengro*.
6. Paul B. Armstrong has identified this quotation as a line from the German poet Novalis (1772–1801). It was used by Joseph Conrad as an epigraph to his novel *Lord Jim* (1900), where Forster probably encountered it.

Chapter XV

1. Germany had colonial interests in West Africa. Mr Wilcox cuts short the remark he was going to make, remembering Margaret's part-German origins.
2. An association of insurance companies.

Chapter XVI

1. Porphyrion was the name of a giant in classical Greek mythology.

Chapter XVII

1. A theatre, probably offering light musical entertainment.
2. Characters from the novels *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, by the eighteenth-century English novelist Henry Fielding.
3. According to Oliver Stallybrass, Eustace Miles (1868–1948) wrote numerous books on health and diet, and ran a

health-food restaurant near Charing Cross for a time.

Chapter XVIII

1. James Gillray (1756–1815) and George Cruikshank (1792–1878) were well-known English caricaturists.

Chapter XIX

1. A range of hills near the south coast of England, mainly in the county of Dorset.
2. There may be an echo here of a passage in one of John Keats's letters: 'I am certain of nothing but of the Holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of Imagination' (*Letters of John Keats*, selected by John Page, London: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 48).
3. An echo of a line in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (2.i.40): 'this precious stone set in the silver sea.'

Chapter XX

1. As we learn later (p. 167), Henry Wilcox's firm is called the Imperial and West African Rubber Company.
2. A yard or street with stables for horses. This would constitute a noise nuisance, and produce unpleasant odours in warm weather.

Chapter XXII

1. Probably St Catherine of Siena, Virgin, the fourteenth-century mystic and author of spiritual writings, rather than the fourth-century St Catherine of Alexandria, Martyr, celebrated for being bound on a wheel. St Francis of Assisi would be more appropriately paired with the former.
2. 'He loved. He was afraid to love.' The source of this Latin phrase has not been identified.

Chapter XXIII

1. Michael Drayton (1563–1631), author of *Poly-Olbion*, a long topographical poem about England and Wales published in two parts in 1612 and 1622.
2. Egyptian goddess of fertility.
3. The tutelary nymph of the river Severn in the mythology of Drayton's poem.
4. A river that flows through Hertfordshire to London.

Chapter XXV

1. An allusion to a celebrated saying of the Duke of Wellington: 'The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton [a famous English public school].'
2. Proposals to increase duty on imports from outside the British Empire, to protect trade within the Empire.

Chapter XXVI

1. A metonymic figure of speech for the Welsh hills, where Druids lived in ancient times.
2. Meaning that he owned a company called Garden Seeds (not, as a rival editor suggests, that he was an amateur gardener).
3. Echoing a famous passage from St Paul, often read at funeral services: 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' (Corinthians 15:55.)
4. Prospero is the central character of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who renounces his magical powers at the conclusion of the play.
5. 'Don't think the husband is like her. He is completely different' (French).

Chapter XXVII

1. American business magnate (1837–1913), who accumulated a vast fortune and collected paintings, books and manuscripts on a similar scale.
2. The source of this quotation has been identified by George H. Thompson as Michelangelo, mediated by John Addington Symonds.

Chapter XXX

1. An abbreviation of Honours Moderations, the first part of the classical degree course at Oxford University.

Chapter XXXI

1. The German dramatist Frank Wedekind (1864–1918) and the English painter Augustus John (1878–1961). Both would have been regarded as avant-garde at this time.

Chapter XXXIII

1. An allusion to Botticelli's famous painting of Venus in a spring landscape, *Primavera*.
2. Dialect word for 'meadow'.

Chapter XXXIV

1. 'If you seek his monument, look around you.' The Latin inscription on the memorial to Sir Christopher Wren, architect of St Paul's Cathedral.

Chapter XXXV

1. 'Colours' here denotes the flag of an army or regiment, lowered in surrender.

Chapter XXXVII

1. An anglicized Italian. Oliver Stallybrass points out that the phrase inverts an Italian proverb, *Inglese italianato … diavolo incarnato* ('Italianate Englishman … devil incarnate').
2. 'It's necessary to sleep on this subject … a comfortable room in the hotel' (French).
3. I presume this means positioned symmetrically.
4. Exercise weights. The association is perhaps with Helen's observation of the Wilcoxes doing their morning exercises in the garden (p. 4).
5. This is not a recognized English idiom. It seems likely that the word 'full' was omitted before 'moon' in the manuscript by accident. Oliver Stallybrass was of this opinion when he prepared the Abinger Edition, but did not venture to make the emendation.

Chapter XLI

1. Also known as the Eumenides, or Furies, the supernatural beings in Greek mythology who punish wrongdoers.
2. The heavy ceremonial cart used to bear statues of the Hindu god Krishna, whose devotees would sometimes cast themselves under the wheels to be crushed to death.
3. Lines from George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862).

Chapter XLII

1. 'A necessary condition' (Latin).

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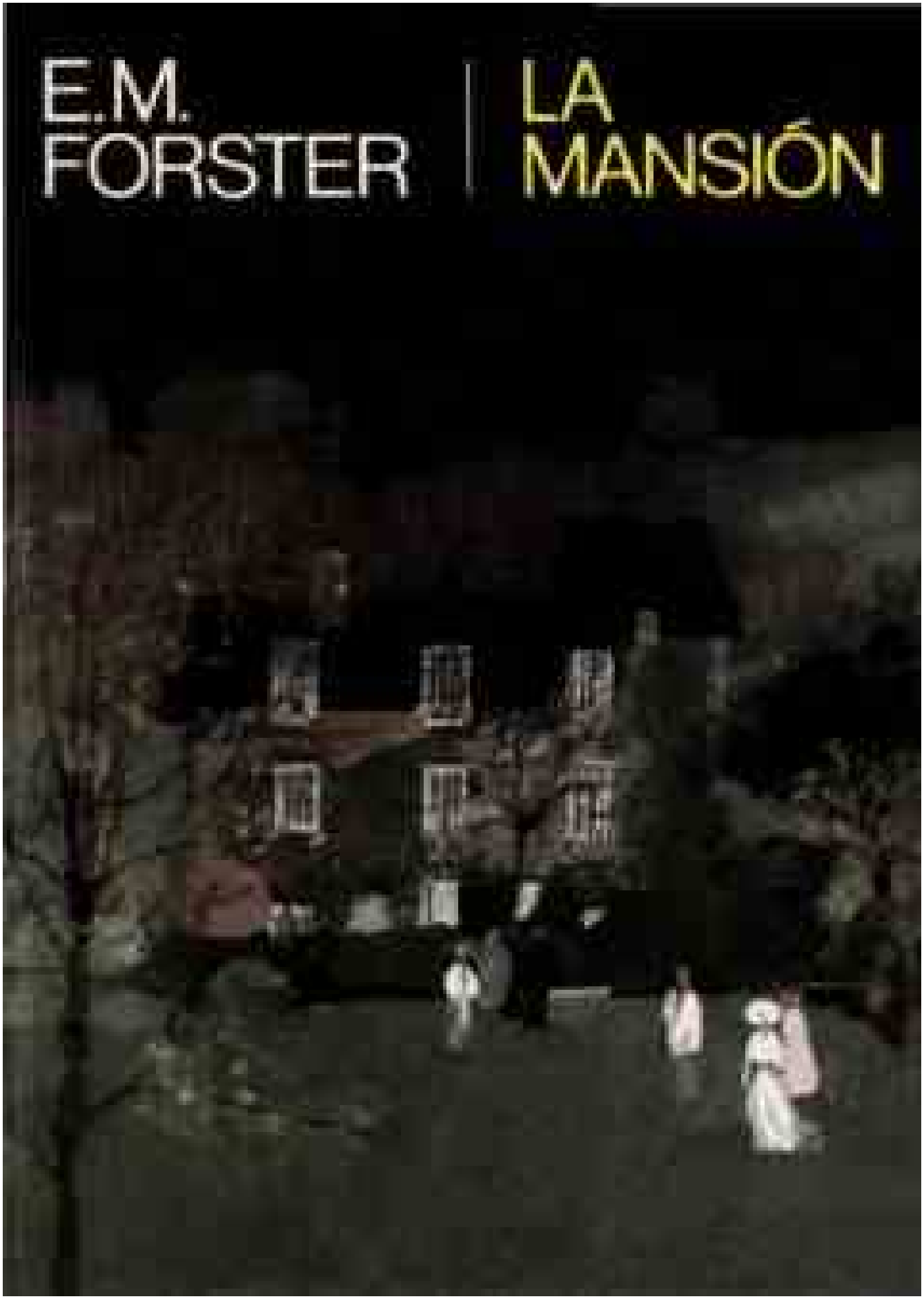
E.M. FORSTER | LA MANSIÓN



LA MANSIÓN

E. M. FORSTER

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Reseña:

Durante una excursión a Spira, las hermanas Margaret y Helen Schlegel hacen amistad con los Wilcox. Helen, la menor de las dos, es invitada a pasar unos días en Howards End, la mansión rural de sus nuevos amigos. La joven escribe una carta a su hermana Margaret diciéndole que Paul, el menor de los Wilcox, y ella se han enamorado. Debido a esto, se produce un terrible malentendido entre las Schlegel y los Wilcox que provoca el distanciamiento de las dos familias.

Poco tiempo después, los Wilcox se trasladan a vivir a una casa cercana al hogar de las dos hermanas y las relaciones no sólo se restablecen sino que se hacen aun más sólidas, sobre todo entre Margaret y la señora Wilcox. Cuando ésta muere, deja Howards End a su amiga, pero la nula validez legal del

documento facilita que tanto el viudo como sus hijos ignoren la última petición de la recién fallecida.

Mientras tanto, Helen ocupa su tiempo en tratar de ayudar a un joven oficinista con problemas laborales y matrimoniales, que se ha quedado en paro por seguir sus equivocados consejos.

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CAPÍTULO PRIMERO

Esta historia podría empezar con una carta de Helen a su hermana.

Howards End. Martes.

Queridísima Meg:

Esto no tiene nada que ver con lo que nos habíamos imaginado. La casa es vieja, pequeña, de ladrillo rojo y, en conjunto, una delicia. Apenas cabemos y no sé lo que va a pasar cuando mañana llegue Paul, el hijo menor. A derecha e izquierda del vestíbulo están el comedor y el saloncito. El mismo vestíbulo es prácticamente una habitación más. Una puerta da a la escalera que sube por una especie de túnel al piso de arriba. En el piso de

arriba hay tres dormitorios en hilera y, sobre cada dormitorio, una buhardilla. A decir verdad, la casa no acaba ahí, pero eso es todo lo que se ve: nueve ventanas según se mira desde el jardín.

También hay un olmo muy grande, a la izquierda, un poco inclinado sobre la casa y en el sitio donde se juntan el jardín y el prado. Ya casi estoy enamorada de este árbol. También hay otros olmos, unas encinas (ni mejores ni peores que cualquier encina), perales, manzanos y una parra. En cambio, no hay abedules. Pero, bueno, tengo que hablarte de mis anfitriones. Sólo quería explicarte que esto no se parece en lo más mínimo a lo que nosotras nos imaginábamos. ¿Qué nos hizo suponer que la casa estaría llena de frisos y recovecos y el jardín surcado por senderos amarillentos? Supongo que asociamos a los Wilcox con los hoteles de lujo: mistress Wilcox deambulando por largos pasillos, con hermosos vestidos, y míster

Wilcox abroncando a la servidumbre, etcétera, etcétera. Así somos de injustas las mujeres.

Regreso el sábado; ya os diré más adelante en qué tren. Aquí están todos tan disgustados como yo de que no pudieras venir; la verdad es que Tibby es una lata; cada mes agarra una nueva enfermedad mortal. ¿Cómo habrá conseguido pillar la fiebre del heno en Londres? Además, aunque lo haya conseguido, es un abuso que tengas que renunciar a un viaje para oír los estornudos de un colegial. Dile a Tibby que Charles Wilcox (el mayor de los hijos, que ahora está en casa) también tiene la fiebre del heno, pero, como es valiente, se molesta cuando alguien le pregunta por su estado. Hombres como los Wilcox le harían mucho bien a Tibby. Pero ya sé que tú no estarás de acuerdo conmigo, así que será mejor que cambie de tema.

Esta carta es tan larga porque te escribo antes del desayuno. ¡Oh, qué bonitas son las hojas de la parra! Toda la casa está cubierta por un emparrado. Hace un rato me asomé a ver el jardín y mistress Wilcox ya estaba ahí. Es evidente que adora su jardín. No me extraña que a veces esté cansada. Contemplaba cómo se abrían las amapolas, luego abandonó el césped y se fue al prado, cuyo extremo derecho veo desde aquí. Iba arrastrando su largo vestido sobre la hierba húmeda y volvió con las manos llenas del heno que segaron ayer: supongo que será para los conejos o algo por el estilo, porque lo estuvo oliendo. El aire es delicioso. Después oí el ruido de una bola de croquet y me asomé otra vez: Charles Wilcox estaba entrenándose; son muy aficionados a todo tipo de juegos, pero se puso a estornudar y tuvo que dejarlo. Al cabo de un rato, oigo de nuevo ruido de bolas y es míster Wilcox el que está jugando, cuando, de

pronto, aatchiiis, aaatchiiis, también tuvo que dejarlo. Después sale Evie, hace unos ejercicios de calistenia en un aparato que tienen sujeto a un ciruelo (le sacan partido a todo), empieza aaatchiiis y entra en casa. Por último, reaparece mistress Wilcox, arrastra que arrastrarás la cola de su vestido, oliendo todavía el heno y contemplando las flores. Te cuento todo esto porque en cierta ocasión dijiste que unas veces la vida es vida y otras, sólo un drama y que hay que saber distinguir cuándo es una cosa y cuándo es la otra, cosa que hasta este momento yo había considerado «una inteligente tontería de Meg». Pero esta mañana, la vida no parece realidad, sino teatro y me he divertido mucho contemplando a los W. Ahora mistress Wilcox acaba de entrar.

Pienso ponerme... (se omite)... Ayer noche mistress Wilcox llevaba... (se omite)... y Evie... (se omite). Ya ves que no es un sitio para andar de

trapillo y, si cierras los ojos, te parece estar en la encopetada mansión que imaginábamos. Pero no si los abres. Los agavanzos son muy delicados. Crecen junto al prado, formando un seto alto y majestuoso del que caen las flores en guirnalda, pero delgado y fino en la base, de modo que puedes ver, a través de él, unos patos y una vaca. Estos animales pertenecen a la granja, que es la única casa próxima a la nuestra. Suena el gong que anuncia el desayuno. Un abrazo muy fuerte y otro menos fuerte para Tibby. Recuerdos a la tía Juley; fue muy bondadosa al brindarse a hacerte compañía, pero menuda lata. Quema esta carta. Te volveré a escribir el jueves.

Helen

Howards End. Viernes.

Queridísima Meg:

Lo estoy pasando maravillosamente bien. Todos me gustan. Mistress Wilcox, más callada que en Alemania, está más encantadora que nunca: jamás conocí a nadie tan entregado a los demás y, lo mejor de todo, es que los demás no abusan de ello. Es la familia más feliz y más alegre que puedas imaginarte. Creo sinceramente que nos estamos haciendo buenos amigos. Lo bueno del caso es que me consideran una tonta y me lo dicen (al menos, míster Wilcox) y que esto suceda y a mí no me importe ya es buena prueba de algo, ¿no te parece? Sobre el sufragio de la mujer míster Wilcox dice las cosas más horrorosas del modo más cortés. Cuando le dije que yo creía en la igualdad, se cruzó de brazos y me dio un baño como nunca me había dado. Meg, ¿cuándo aprenderemos a no hablar tanto? En mi vida me había sentido tan abochornada. No pude mencionar un sólo momento en que los hombres hubieran sido iguales,

ni siquiera un momento en que el deseo de ser iguales les hubiera hecho más felices. No pude decir ni una palabra. Nada, que había sacado la idea de que la igualdad es buena cosa de un puñado de libros, de unas poesías y de ti. En cualquier caso, míster Wilcox hizo pedazos mi idea y lo hizo sin ofenderme, como lo hacen las personas verdaderamente fuertes. Por mi parte, yo me río de ellos por haber pillado la fiebre del heno. Vivimos como gallos de pelea. Charles nos lleva de paseo cada día en coche: a ver una tumba en un arbolado, una ermita, un camino maravilloso construido por el rey de Mercia... tenis, cricket, bridge, y por la noche nos reunimos todos en esta adorable casita. Ahora está reunido todo el clan: esto parece una conejera. Evie es un sol. Quieren que me quede hasta el domingo. Supongo que no habrá inconveniente. El tiempo, espléndido y el paisaje, maravilloso:

hacia el oeste, hacia las montañas. Gracias por tu carta. Quema ésta. Te quiere

Helen

Howards End. Domingo.

Querida, queridísima Meg:

No sé lo que vas a decir: Paul y yo nos hemos enamorado. Paul es el menor de los hijos, el que llegó el miércoles.

CAPÍTULO II

Margaret echó una ojeada a la nota de su hermana y la tendió a su tía por encima de la mesa del desayuno. Hubo un instante de silencio y luego se desbordaron las compuertas.

—No puedo decirte nada, tía Juley, de todo esto sé tanto como tú. Conocimos a los padres la primavera pasada, en el extranjero. Sé tan poco que ni siquiera sabía el nombre de su hijo. Es algo tan... —agitó la mano y se rió un poco.

—En tal caso, es extremadamente precipitado.

—¿Quién sabe? ¿Quién sabe, tía Juley?

—Pero, Margaret, querida... no podemos perder la cordura unte los hechos consumados. Sin duda es demasiado precipitado.

—¡Quién sabe!

—Pero, Margaret, querida...

—Iré a buscar las otras cartas —dijo Margaret—. No, antes me acabaré el desayuno. La verdad es que ya no las tengo. Conocimos a los Wilcox en una espantosa excursión que hicimos a Spira, desde Heidelberg. A Helen y a mí se nos había metido en la cabeza que en Spira había una catedral antigua y enorme. El arzobispo de Spira era uno de los siete electores, ya sabes... «Spira, Maguncia y Colonia.» Estas tres sedes gobernaron en su tiempo el valle del Rin y al río se le llamaba la calle de los Prelados.

—A pesar de todo, estoy bastante inquieta por este asunto, Margaret.

—El tren atravesaba un puente de barcas; a primera vista, la cosa parecía estar muy bien, pero, ¡ay!, a los cinco minutos ya lo

habíamos visto todo. La catedral estaba hecha una ruina, una perfecta ruina por obra y gracia de la restauración; no habían respetado ni una pulgada de la antigua estructura. Perdimos un día entero y conocimos a los Wilcox mientras tomábamos unos bocadillos en el parque. Pobres, ellos también habían picado; es más, estaban pasando unos días en Spira y se mostraron encantados cuando Helen les insistió para que se vinieran con nosotras a Heidelberg. Para ser exactos, vinieron al día siguiente. Juntos hicimos algunas excursiones e intimamos lo suficiente como para pedir a Helen que fuera a visitarles. A mí también me invitaron, naturalmente, pero la enfermedad de Tibby me impidió ir, de modo que el lunes pasado Helen se fue sola. Y eso es todo. Ya sabes tanto como yo. Se trata, como ves, de un joven que procede de lo desconocido. Helen tenía que volver el sábado, pero retrasó la vuelta hasta el lunes, quizás a causa de... no sé.

Se calló y escuchó los ruidos de la mañana londinense. La casa estaba en Wickham Place y era tranquila porque un elevado promontorio de edificios separaba el lugar de la avenida principal. Daba la impresión de un remanso o, mejor, de un estuario cuyas aguas refluyeran de un mar invisible y se remansaran en un profundo silencio mientras las olas aún batían. Aunque el promontorio estaba compuesto de pisos costosos, con zaguanes cavernosos, porteros y plantas de interior, cumplían su cometido y proporcionaban a las viejas casas de enfrente una relativa paz. El tiempo había de barrer también aquellas casas y otro promontorio se elevaría en su lugar, como si la humanidad se apilase cada vez más y más alto en el preciado suelo de Londres.

Mistress Munt, que tenía su propio método para interpretar a sus sobrinas, decidió que Margaret estaba un poco histérica y que intentaba ganar tiempo con un torrente de palabrería. Sintiéndose diplomática, lamentó lo de Spira y declaró que nunca, nunca se dejaría arrastrar a visitarlo, añadiendo, por su cuenta, que en Alemania tergiversaban los principios de la restauración.

—Los alemanes —dijo— son demasiado concienzudos y eso está muy bien a veces, pero otras, no.

—Exacto —dijo Margaret—, los alemanes son demasiado concienzudos —y sus ojos empezaron a brillar.

—Desde luego, yo a los Schlegel os considero ingleses —dijo mistress Munt apresuradamente—, ingleses hasta la médula de los huesos.

Margaret se inclinó hacia delante y apretó la mano de su tía.

—Y esto me recuerda la carta de Helen...

—Ah, sí, tía Juley, estoy pensando en la carta de Helen. Ya sé que tengo que ir a verla. Estoy pensando en ella. Sí, voy a ir.

—Pero ve con algún plan concreto —dijo mistress Munt dejando percibir en su amable tono un punto de exasperación—. Margaret, si me permites intervenir en este asunto, no te dejes sorprender. ¿Qué opinas de los Wilcox? ¿Son de nuestra clase? ¿Son gente bien? ¿Serán capaces de comprender a Helen que es, en mi opinión, una persona muy especial? ¿Les interesa la literatura y el arte? Si lo piensas bien, es algo muy importante. La Literatura y el Arte: importantísimo. ¿Qué edad tendrá ese chico? Ella dice «el menor de los hijos». ¿Estará en condiciones de contraer matrimonio? ¿Hará feliz a Helen? ¿Supones que...?

—Yo no supongo nada.

Las dos empezaron a hablar a la vez.

—En ese caso...

—En ese caso, no puedo ir con ninguna idea fija, ¿no lo ves?

—Al contrario...

—Me molesta hacer planes. Me molestan las líneas de actuación. Helen no es una niña.

—En tal caso, querida, ¿por qué vas?

Margaret guardó silencio. Si su tía no veía por qué tenía que ir, ella no pensaba decírselo. No diría «quiero a mi hermana; tengo que estar con ella en esta crisis por que atraviesa su vida». Los afectos son más reticentes que las pasiones, y su expresión, más sutil. Si ella estuviera enamorada de un hombre, lo proclama; ría, como Helen, a los cuatro vientos; pero como sólo quería a su hermana, empleaba el silencioso lenguaje de la simpatía.

—Os considero unas chicas raras —continuó mistress Munt—, y unas chicas estupendas, más maduras, en muchos aspectos, de lo que corresponde a vuestra edad. Pero, ¿no te ofenderás si te digo

que no estás a la altura de las circunstancias? El caso requiere una persona de más edad. Querida, nada me reclama en Swanage —abrió sus rollizos brazos—. Estoy a tu entera disposición. Déjame ir en tu lugar a esa casa... que nunca me acuerdo de cómo se llama.

—Tía Juley —Margaret dio un salto y besó a su tía—, soy yo quien tiene que ir a Howards End. Tú no lo comprendes, aunque nunca te agradeceré bastante tu oferta.

—Sí que lo comprendo —replicó mistress Munt con inmensa confianza—. No pienso ir a entrometerme. Sólo haré averiguaciones. Las averiguaciones son necesarias. Voy a serte sincera: aún sin proponértelo, en tu ansiedad por la felicidad de Helen, ofenderías a esos Wilcox con tus preguntas impetuosas.

—No les preguntaré nada. Helen dice que se ha enamorado de un hombre y que es correspondida; no hay preguntas que hacer mientras la cosa no pase de ahí. El resto carece de importancia. Tal vez se imponga un noviazgo largo, pero averiguaciones, preguntas, planes, líneas de actuación, eso no, tía Juley, ni hablar.

Salió corriendo, ni hermosa ni sublime, pero embargada por algo que suplía ambas cualidades: algo que se podría describir como una profunda vivacidad, una constante y sincera respuesta a todo lo que la vida le ofreciera.

—Si Helen me hubiera dicho lo mismo respecto a un dependiente o a un oficinista sin un céntimo...

—Querida Margaret, haz el favor de entrar en la biblioteca y cierra la puerta. Las criadas están sacando el polvo a los muebles.

—...o si quisiera casarse con un empleado de Carter Paterson [1], mi actitud habría sido idéntica —de pronto, en uno de aquellos cambios que hacían pensar a su tía que no estaba perdidamente loca y a los observadores de otro tipo que no vivía en un mundo de especulaciones estériles, añadió—, aunque, en el caso de Carter Paterson, yo habría exigido un noviazgo muy largo, para ser sincera.

—¡Eso espero! —dijo mistress Munt—. La verdad es que te sigo con dificultad. Imagínate por unos instantes que les dices algo parecido a los Wilcox. Yo te entiendo, pero todo el mundo creería que estás chiflada. ¡Figúrate, qué desconcierto para Helen! Aquí lo

que hace falta es una persona que vaya pasito a paso, que vea cómo son las cosas y a dónde conducen.

Margaret volvió a la carga.

—Pero tú viniste a decir que hay que deshacer ese compromiso.

—Probablemente, pero pasito a paso.

—¿Se puede deshacer un compromiso pasito a paso? —sus ojos se iluminaron—. ¿De qué supones tú que están hechos los compromisos? Yo creo que están hechos de un material muy duro, que se puede romper, pero no se deshace. Es diferente a otros vínculos. Éstos se estiran y se encogen, admiten grados. Son distintos.

—Exacto, pero ¿por qué no me dejas ir a Howards End y te ahorras esa molestia? Te doy mi palabra de no entrometerme. Mira, conozco tan a fondo lo que queréis vosotras, las Schlegel, que me bastará con echar una ojeada al panorama.

Margaret le dio las gracias de nuevo, la besó una vez más y corrió escaleras arriba a ver a su hermano, que no estaba del todo bien.

La fiebre del heno le había tenido inquieto la mayor parte de la noche, le dolía la cabeza, tenía los ojos llorosos y la membrana de la mucosa, según informó a su hermana, en un estado francamente insatisfactorio. Lo único que le animaba a seguir viviendo era que Margaret le había prometido leerle, cada vez que tuviera un rato libre, las *Conversaciones imaginarias* de Walter Savage Landor.

Era una situación difícil. Había que hacer algo con Helen. Alguien tenía que decirle que el amor a primera vista no es un crimen. Un telegrama en este sentido resultaría frío y críptico, una visita personal se hacía imposible por momentos. Llegó el médico y confirmó que Tibby estaba bastante mal. ¿No sería mejor aceptar la amable oferta de la tía Juley y enviarla a Howards End con una nota?

Margaret era impulsiva y cambiaba de idea en un abrir y cerrar de ojos. Corriendo escaleras abajo, gritó:

—Tía, he cambiado de opinión. Quiero que vayas tú.

Salía un tren de King's Cross a las once. A las diez y media Tibby, con un extraño sentido de la autodesaparición, se quedó dormido y Margaret pudo acompañar a su tía a la estación.

—Recuerda, tía Juley: no discutas el compromiso. Dale mi carta a Helen y dile a ella lo que se te ocurra, pero mantente alejada de la familia. Apenas si sabemos sus nombres y, además, estas cosas son incivilizadas y erróneas.

—¿Incivilizadas? —preguntó la tía Juley presintiendo que no captaba una sutil observación.

—Bueno, quizá empleé un término afectado. Quise decir que sólo debes discutir el asunto con Helen...

—Sólo con Helen.

—Porque... —pero no era el momento de extenderse en consideraciones sobre la personalísima naturaleza del amor. Margaret se reprimió y se contentó con estrechar la mano de su bondadosa tía y con meditar juiciosa y a la par poéticamente en el viaje que iba a empezar en King's Cross.

Como todos los que han vivido mucho tiempo en una gran ciudad, Margaret experimentaba unos sentimientos muy intensos en las estaciones terminales. Son las puertas de lo glorioso y lo desconocido. Por ellas se parte hacia la aventura, hacia el sol; por ellas, ay, se regresa. En Paddington laten Cornualles y la costa occidental; en las rampas de Liverpool Street se agitan las marismas, y el extranjero ilimitado; Escocia se oculta en los pilares de Euston; Wessex, más allá del caos de Waterloo. Entendiéndolo así, los italianos que tienen la desgracia de trabajar como camareros en Berlín llaman a la Anhalt Bahnhof la Stazione d'Italia, porque desde allí regresan a sus hogares. Y no hay un londinense que no confiera a sus estaciones una cierta personalidad y no haga extensivas a ellas, siquiera un poco, sus sensaciones de amor y miedo.

A Margaret —y espero que esto no predisponga al lector en su contra— la estación de King's Cross siempre le había sugerido el infinito. La misma situación de la estación, oculta tras el fatuo esplendor de Saint Pancras, llevaba implícita una reflexión sobre el materialismo de la vida. Los dos grandes arcos descoloridos, indiferentes, sostén de un desangelado reloj, eran los soportales de

una eterna aventura, cuyo objetivo podía ser triunfal, pero que no se expresaba en términos de triunfo. Si el lector considera todo esto ridículo, debe recordar que no es Margaret quien se lo cuenta, y permítaseme añadir que llegaron a la estación con mucho adelanto, que mistress Munt se aseguró un asiento bien cómodo, de cara a la marcha, pero no demasiado cerca de la máquina, y que Margaret, de regreso a Wickham Place, encontró el siguiente telegrama:

> «Todo ha terminado. Ojalá no hubiera escrito nunca. No se lo cuentes a nadie. — Helen.»

Pero la tía Juley ya se había ido, inexorablemente, y ninguna fuerza de este mundo podría detenerla.

CAPÍTULO III

Con infinita complacencia mistress Munt ensayaba su misión. Sus sobrinas eran dos jóvenes independientes y no se le presentaba frecuentemente la ocasión de ayudarlas. Las hijas de Emily nunca habían sido chicas normales. Se quedaron sin madre al nacer Tibby, cuando Helen tenía cinco años y Margaret, trece recién cumplidos. Esto ocurrió antes de la promulgación del *Deceased Wife's Sister Bill* [2], de modo que mistress Munt no halló traba alguna para ofrecerse a cuidar de la casa de Wickham Place. Pero su cuñado, que era un individuo extraño, y alemán por añadidura, puso en antecedentes a Margaret, la cual, con la crudeza de los adolescentes, respondió «que no, que podían apañarse mejor solos». Cinco años después murió el señor Schlegel y mistress Munt reiteró su oferta. Margaret, esta vez sin dureza, se mostró agradecida y extremadamente sutil, pero la respuesta fue la misma. «No me entrometeré por tercera vez», se dijo mistress Munt. Pero, naturalmente, volvió a hacerlo cuando se enteró, con horror, de que Margaret, por entonces mayor de edad, estaba retirando su dinero de las inversiones seguras e invirtiéndolo en valores extranjeros, que siempre acaban por irse al garete. Callar habría sido un crimen. Su fortuna personal estaba colocada en los Ferrocarriles Nacionales y rogó vehementemente a su sobrina que hiciera lo propio. «Tenemos per permanecer unidas, querida.» Margaret, por cortesía, invirtió unos cientos de libras en los Ferrocarriles de Nottingham y Derby y, aunque los valores extranjeros iban admirablemente bien y los Ferrocarriles de Nottingham y Derby declinaban con esa firme dignidad de que sólo los Ferrocarriles Nacionales son capaces, mistress Munt nunca dejó de felicitarse y de decir: «Esa operación se realizó gracias a mí. Cuando se produzca la hecatombe, la pobre

Margaret tendrá un rinconcito en el que refugiarse.» Aquel año Helen alcanzó la mayoría de edad y sucedió exactamente lo mismo: retiró su dinero de Consols, aunque también y casi sin presión, consagró una fracción a los Ferrocarriles de Nottingham y Derby. Por lo que respecta a la vida social, mistress Munt nunca consiguió nada. Tarde o temprano las chicas entrarían en el proceso conocido por «dejarse resbalar por la pendiente», y si no lo habían hecho ya era porque lo harían con mayor intensidad en el futuro. Recibían a mucha gente en Wickham Place: músicos barbudos, una actriz, primos alemanes (con los extranjeros, nunca se sabe), amistades cosechadas en hoteles del Continente (que ya se sabe lo que son). Interesante, sí, nadie en Swanage apreciaba tanto la cultura como mistress Munt, pero peligroso. El desastre tenía que producirse. ¡Cuán acertada estaba y qué suerte haber estado presente cuando el desastre se produjo!

El tren corría en dirección norte, atravesando innumerables túneles. El viaje sólo duraba una hora, pero mistres Munt tuvo que subir y bajar la cortinilla una y otra vez. Pasó a través del túnel de North Welwyn, vio un instante la luz y se metió en el túnel de South Welwyn, tristemente célebre; pasó por el inmenso viaducto, cuyos arcos se extienden sobre las tranquilas praderas y el nostálgico curso del Tewin; bordeó los parques de los políticos. En ocasiones, la carretera del Norte corría junto a los raíles, más íntima que cualquier ferrocarril, despertado, tras una siesta de siglos, a una nueva vida como la proporcionan el olor de los automóviles y los anuncios de píldoras contra la bilis. Mistress Munt permanecía ajena por igual a la historia, a la tragedia, al pasado y al futuro; sólo se concentraba en el objeto de su viaje y en el rescate de la pobre Helen de todo aquel terrible lío.

La estación correspondiente a Howards End era Hilton, una de esas grandes poblaciones situadas a lo largo de la carretera del Norte y que deben su tamaño al trasiego de los autobuses y de los vehículos de los tiempos anteriores a los autobuses. Próximo a Londres, Hilton no conocía la decadencia de las poblaciones rústicas y su calle Mayor se había extendido a derecha e izquierda en parcelas residenciales. Por espacio de una milla, pasó ante los distraídos ojos de mistress Munt una serie de casas de ladrillo y pizarra, serie interrumpida en un punto por seis túmulos daneses

que se alineaban uno junto a otro a lo largo de la calle: tumbas de guerreros. Detrás de estos túmulos se apretujaban las viviendas y el tren se detuvo en un núcleo que era casi una ciudad.

La estación, como el paisaje y como las cartas de Helen, tenía una nota indeterminada. ¿Adónde conducía? ¿A Inglaterra o a los barrios residenciales? La estación era nueva: tenía andenes separados, un paso subterráneo y toda la aparente comodidad que exigen los hombres de negocios. Pero también encerraba atisbos de vida local, de relación personal, como hasta la propia mistress Munt iba a descubrir.

—Busco una casa —confió al mozo de los billetes—. Su nombre es Howards Lodge. ¿Sabe usted dónde está?

—¡Míster Wilcox! —gritó el mozo.

Un joven que se hallaba cerca, se volvió.

—Esta señora busca Howards End.

No quedaba más remedio que seguir adelante, aunque mistress Munt estaba tan azorada que no podía ni siquiera mirar al joven desconocido. Con todo, y recordando que eran dos hermanos, tuvo el buen sentido de decir:

—Perdone que se lo pregunte, pero ¿es usted el mayor o el menor de los Wilcox?

—El menor. ¿En qué puedo servirla?

—Ah, bueno... —dijo controlándose con dificultad—. ¿Es usted de veras...? Yo —se alejó del mozo de los billetes y bajó la voz— soy la tía de miss Schlegel. Disculpe usted que me presente a mí misma. Mi nombre es Munt.

Tuvo conciencia de que el joven se quitaba el sombrero y decía con cierta frialdad:

—Ya; miss Schlegel está con nosotros. ¿Quiere verla?

—Posiblemente...

—Le buscaré un coche. No, espere un momento —recapacitó unos instantes—. Nuestro automóvil está aquí. Yo la llevaré.

—Es usted muy amable.

—En absoluto, señora, si tiene la bondad de esperar a que saquen un paquete de la oficina. Por aquí.

—¿No estará mi sobrina con usted, por casualidad?

—No. Vine con mi padre, que se ha ido al Norte en este mismo tren. Verá a miss Schlegel a la hora de comer. Porque espero que se quedará usted a comer.

—De momento, desearía verla —dijo mistress Munt sin comprometerse en el aspecto alimenticio hasta que no hubiese estudiado un poco más al novio de Helen. Parecía un caballero, pero había aturdido de tal modo a mistress Munt que la buena señora tenía las facultades de observación obnubiladas. Lo estudió furtivamente. A los ojos de una mujer, no había nada incorrecto en las agudas depresiones que se advertían en las comisuras de la boca, ni en su frente cuadrada. Era cetrino, iba bien afeitado y parecía acostumbrado a mandar.

—¿Qué prefiere, delante o detrás? Delante se nota mucho el viento.

—Preferiría ir delante, a poder ser... Así podremos hablar.

—Sí, claro, pero permítame... No sé qué estarán haciendo con ese paquete —se metió en la oficina de correos y gritó con una voz nueva—: ¡Eh, usted! ¿Me van a hacer esperar todo el día? ¡El paquete para los Wilcox, de Howards End! ¡Muévanse! —salió y añadió en un tono más suave—: Esta estación tiene una organización desastrosa. Si estuviera en mi mano, los echaba a todos. Permítame que la ayude.

—Es usted muy amable —dijo mistress Munt al tiempo que se instalaba en una lujosa caja de cuero rojo y se dejaba envolver en mantas y bufandas. Se comportaba con más cortesía de lo que hubiera deseado, pero aquel joven era realmente amable. Además, estaba un poco asustada por la extraordinaria confianza del joven en sí mismo—. Muy amable —repitió—. Es más de lo que yo esperaba.

—Es usted muy gentil al decir esto —replicó él con un ligero atisbo de sorpresa que, como la mayoría de los atisbos, le pasó inadvertido a mistress Munt—. Yo sólo vine a acompañar a mi padre a la estación.

—¿Sabe usted?, tuvimos carta de Helen esta mañana.

El joven Wilcox echaba gasolina, ponía el coche en marcha y ejecutaba otros actos con los que esta historia nada tiene que ver.

El automóvil empezó a balancearse y la figura de la buena señora, intentando dar explicaciones, oscilaba agradablemente entre los cojines rojos.

—Será un placer tenerla a usted con nosotros —dijo él—. ¡Eh, oiga! ¡Ese paquete! ¡El paquete para Howards End, a ver si lo traen, eh!

Un mozo barbudo apareció con el paquete en una mano y un libro de recibos en la otra. Los gritos se mezclaban con el traqueteo del motor.

—Ahora tengo que firmar, ¿eh? ¿Encima tengo que firmar, después de todo este follón? ¿Y ni siquiera tiene un lápiz? Recuerde esto: la próxima vez le denuncio al jefe de estación. Mi tiempo tiene un valor, aunque el suyo no lo tenga. Ahí va —«ahí va» era una propina.

—Lo siento mucho, mistress Munt.

—No se preocupe usted, míster Wilcox.

—¿Tiene algún inconveniente en que pasemos por el pueblo? Daremos un pequeño rodeo, pero tengo que hacer un par de recados.

—Me encantará pasar por el pueblo. Como es lógico, tengo sumo interés en hablar con usted.

Al decir esto se sintió avergonzada, porque estaba desobedeciendo las instrucciones de Margaret. En fin, al menos desobedecía la letra. Margaret le había prohibido discutir el asunto con extraños, pero seguramente no sería incivilizado ni erróneo discutirlo con el propio interesado, toda vez que el azar los había reunido.

El joven no contestó. Subió a su lado, se colocó los guantes y las gafas y partieron. El mozo de la barba —misterios de la vida— se quedó contemplándolos con admiración.

El viento les daba en la cara al bajar por la calle de la estación y arrojaba el polvo a los ojos de mistress Munt. Sin embargo ésta, no

bien desembocaron en la carretera del Norte, abrió el fuego.

—Ya puede usted figurarse —dijo— que la noticia nos ha causado una gran impresión.

—¿Qué noticia?

—Míster Wilcox —dijo mistress Munt con franqueza—, Margaret me lo ha contado todo, absolutamente todo. He visto la carta de Helen.

El joven no pudo mirarla a la cara porque sus ojos estaban fijos en el camino. Corrían a toda velocidad por la calle Mayor. Inclinó la cabeza en dirección a su acompañante y dijo:

—Perdone, no entendí lo que decía.

—Hablo de Helen, claro está. Helen es una chica excepcional. Supongo que no le importará que se lo diga, sobre todo considerando sus sentimientos hacia ella. No vengo con la intención de entrometerme, pero, créame, nos ha causado una gran impresión.

Se detuvieron ante una pañería. Sin responder, el joven dio media vuelta en su asiento y contempló la nube de polvo que habían levantado a su paso por la villa. La nube se iba posando, aunque no precisamente en la calle de la que había surgido: una parte se colaba por las ventanas abiertas, otra blanqueaba las rosas y grosellas de los jardines lindantes con la calzada y una cierta proporción entraba en los pulmones de los ciudadanos. «Me pregunto cuándo tendrán la sensatez de asfaltar la calle», fue su comentario.

Un hombre salió corriendo de la pañería con un rollo de linóleo y partieron.

—Margaret no pudo venir personalmente por culpa del pobre Tibby, así que he venido yo en su nombre para sostener una larga conversación.

—Lamento estar tan espeso —dijo el joven deteniéndose de nuevo ante una tienda—, pero sigo sin entender nada.

—Helen, míster Wilcox... mi sobrina y usted...

El joven se levantó las gafas y la miró de hito en hito, absolutamente desconcertado. El horror atenazó el corazón de

mistress Munt, pues incluso ella empezó a sospechar que estaban hablando de cosas distintas y que había empezado su misión cometiendo una odiosa torpeza.

—¿Miss Schlegel y yo? —preguntó el joven frunciendo los labios.

—Confío en que haya un malentendido —susurró mistress Munt —. Su carta decía eso, sin lugar a dudas.

—Bueno, ¿qué decía?

—Que usted y ella... —se calló y bajó los ojos.

—Creo que ya entiendo lo que quiere decir —dijo él con cierta hostilidad—. ¡Qué confusión tan absurda!

—De modo que usted no... —balbuceó la buena señora enrojeciendo y deseando no haber nacido.

—Difícilmente, puesto que ya estoy comprometido con otra — hubo un instante de silencio, el joven aspiró profundamente y prorrumpió en un—: ¡Oh, Dios mío! ¡No me diga que Paul ha vuelto a cometer una de sus tonterías!

—¡Pero Paul es usted!

—No.

—¿Entonces por qué me dijo en la estación que usted era Paul?

—Perdone, señora, yo no dije tal cosa. Mi nombre es Charles.

«El menor» tanto podía referirse a él en relación con su padre como al segundo hermano en relación con el primogénito. Había mucho que discutir al respecto por ambas partes y, andando el tiempo, lo discutieron, pero en aquel momento se enfrentaban a otros problemas.

—Quiere usted decirme que Paul...

A la buena señora no le agradó la voz del joven. Parecía que estuviese hablando a un criado y, convencida de que le había engañado en la estación, también ella se enfureció.

—Quiere usted decirme que Paul y su sobrina...

Mistress Munt —así es la naturaleza humana— decidió erigirse en paladín de los enamorados. No estaba dispuesta a que aquel joven altivo la intimidase.

—Sí, señor, ambos se estiman mucho —dijo—. Estoy segura de que así se lo harán saber a su debido tiempo. Nosotras nos hemos enterado esta mañana.

Charles cerró el puño y gritó:

—¡El muy idiota! ¡Ese pequeño cretino!

Mistress Munt trató de liberarse de sus frazadas.

—¡Si ésta es su actitud, míster Wilcox, prefiero seguir a pie!

—Le ruego que no haga semejante cosa. En seguida llegaremos a casa. Déjeme decirle, ante todo, que este asunto es inviable y que tenemos que impedirlo.

Mistress Munt perdía pocas veces los estribos y cuando lo hacía era para proteger a los que amaba. En esta ocasión, estalló:

—Estoy completamente de acuerdo, caballero. El asunto es inviable y yo lo impediré. Mi sobrina es una chica excepcional y yo no estoy dispuesta a permanecer mano sobre mano cuando ella está a punto de arrojarse en brazos de gentes que no la quieren bien.

Charles movió las mandíbulas.

—¡Considerando que mi sobrina sólo conoce a su hermano de usted desde el miércoles y que conoció a su padres de usted en un hotel perdido de...!

—¿Podría usted bajar la voz? El tendero nos va a oír.

El *esprit de classe* —si puede aplicarse aquí esta expresión— era muy fuerte en mistress Munt. Se sentó temblando mientras un miembro de la clase baja depositaba junto al rollo de linóleo un embudo de metal, una cacerola y una regadera.

—¿Está todo bien sujeto?

—Sí, señor —y el miembro de la clase baja se desvaneció envuelto en una nube de polvo.

—Le prevengo, señora: Paul no tiene un céntimo, es un inútil.

—No necesita prevenirme de nada, míster Wilcox, se lo aseguro. La prevención es a la inversa. Mi sobrina ha sido muy alocada; le daré una buena regañina y me la llevaré conmigo a Londres.

—Mi hermano se marcha dentro de poco a Nigeria. No puede pensar en casarse durante unos años y, cuando lo haga, tiene que

ser con una mujer que pueda soportar aquel clima. Por otra parte, ¿por qué no nos habrá dicho nada? Claro, debe de sentirse avergonzado. Sabe que ha cometido una tontería. Eso es lo que es: un perfecto majadero.

La buena señora se puso furiosa.

—En cambio a miss Schlegel le ha faltado tiempo para publicar la noticia.

—Si yo fuera un hombre, míster Wilcox, le daría un par de puñetazos por esta observación. Usted no le llega a la suela del zapato a mi sobrina, no puede usted sentarse en la misma habitación en que ella esté, y aún se atreve... aún tiene el valor de... ¡Me niego a discutir con una persona como usted!

—Yo lo único que sé es que ella ha aireado la noticia a los cuatro vientos, y él no. Mi padre está fuera y...

—Y yo lo único que sé es que...

—¿Me deja terminar la frase?

—No.

Charles apretó los dientes e hizo zigzaguear el automóvil por el sendero. Mistress Munt chilló.

Así jugaron un rato al juego de las supremacías familiares, juego al que se juega siempre que el amor une a dos miembros de nuestra raza. Pero lo jugaron con un vigor desacostumbrado, afirmando con un torrente de palabras que los Schlegel eran mejores que los Wilcox y que los Wilcox eran mejores que los Schlegel. Dejaron de lado la compostura. El hombre era joven y la mujer estaba hondamente alterada; en ambos latía una vena de grosería. Su pelea no fue más sorprendente de lo que son la mayoría de las peleas: inevitables cuando se producen, increíbles después. Pero en este caso, el asunto era más fútil de lo normal. En unos instantes los contendientes se habían serenado. El automóvil se detuvo en la puerta de Howards End y Helen, muy pálida, corrió al encuentro de su tía.

—Tía Juley, acabo de recibir un telegrama de Margaret; quise impedir que vinieras. Todo... todo ha terminado.

Aquello era demasiado para mistress Munt y la buena señora rompió a llorar.

—¡Paul! —gritó Charles Wilcox quitándose los guantes.

—No se lo digas. No tienen que enterarse nunca.

—Oh, querida Helen...

—¡Paul! ¡Paul!

Un jovencito salió de la casa.

—Paul, ¿es cierto esto?

—Yo... yo no...

—¿Sí o no? A preguntas directas, respuestas directas. ¿Sí o no, miss Schlegel?

—Charles, querido —dijo una voz desde el jardín—. Charles, querido, no se hacen preguntas directas. Estas cosas no existen.

Todos se callaron. Era mistress Wilcox.

Se aproximó al grupo tal y como Helen la había descrito en su carta: arrastrando silenciosamente la cola de su vestido por el césped. Llevaba una gavilla de heno en las manos y no parecía pertenecer al mundo de los jóvenes y del automóvil, sino a la casa y al árbol que le daba sombra. Se percibía en ella una honda reverencia por el pasado y sobre ella había descendido esa sabiduría instintiva que sólo el pasado puede conferir; esa sabiduría a la que damos la torpe denominación de aristocracia. Tal vez no fuera de noble cuna, pero sin duda tenía muy presentes a sus antepasados y a ellos acudía en busca de ayuda. Cuando vio a Charles enfadado, a Paul aterrado y a mistress Munt con los ojos arrasados en lágrimas, oyó a sus antepasados que le decían: «Separa a estos seres, porque se van a hacer mucho daño los unos a los otros. El resto puede esperar.» No preguntó nada. Menos aún fingió que nada había ocurrido, como habría hecho una anfitriona socialmente competente. Se limitó a decir:

—Miss Schlegel, ¿quiere usted acompañar a su tía a su habitación o a la mía, según prefiera? Paul, busca a Evie y dile que prepare comida para seis, aunque no estoy segura de si todos bajaremos a comer.

Una vez la hubieron obedecido, se volvió a su hijo mayor, que todavía estaba en el traqueteante y apestoso automóvil, le sonrió con ternura y, sin pronunciar una palabra, regresó a sus flores.

—Madre —dijo Charles—, ¿sabías que Paul ha estado haciendo tonterías otra vez?

—No pasa nada, querido Charles. Ya han roto el compromiso.

—¡El compromiso!

—Ya no se aman, si lo prefieres así —dijo mistress Wilcox deteniéndose a oler una rosa.

CAPÍTULO IV

Helen y su tía volvieron a Wickham Place en un estado de absoluta postración y, durante un tiempo, Margaret tuvo tres inválidos a su cuidado. Mistress Munt se recobró aprisa. Tenía muy desarrollada la facultad de distorsionar el pasado y al cabo de unos días había olvidado su imprudente participación en la catástrofe. En el mismo momento de producirse el cataclismo, exclamaba: «¡Gracias a Dios, la pobre Margaret se ha ahorrado todo esto!», frase que se convirtió, en el viaje de regreso a Londres en: «Alguien tenía que hacerlo», lo que, a su vez, maduró en esta fórmula permanente: «Cuando verdaderamente ayudé a las chicas de Emily fue en el asunto de los Wilcox.» Helen, sin embargo, era una paciente más seria. Nuevas ideas le habían asaltado como un rayo y estaba perpleja por esas ideas y por sus consecuencias.

La verdad es que se había enamorado, no de una persona, sino de una familia.

Antes de la llegada de Paul le habían dado la vuelta como a un calcetín. La energía de los Wilcox la había fascinado y había engendrado en su mente sensible una imagen nueva de la belleza. Estar con ellos todo el día al aire libre, dormir bajo su mismo techo, le parecían los goces supremos de esta vida y esto le condujo a un anulación de la personalidad, lo que ya es, de por sí, un posible preludio del amor. Le gustaba someterse a míster Wilcox, a Evie, a Charles; le gustaba que le dijeran que su concepto de la vida era pura autojustificación o mera retórica; que la Igualdad, el Sufragio de la Mujer y el Socialismo eran una tontería, el Arte y la Literatura, excepto cuando contribuyen al fortalecimiento del carácter, una tontería. Uno tras otro los Wilcox derribaron los fetiches de la familia Schlegel y Helen, aunque aparentase

defenderlos, se alegraba. Cuando míster Wilcox aseguró que un hombre de negocios decidido y capaz hace más bien al mundo que una docena de reformistas sociales, Helen aceptó esta curiosa afirmación sin pestañear y se reclinó confortablemente en los cojines del automóvil. Cuando Charles dijo: «¿Por qué ser considerado con los criados si ellos no lo aprecian?», Helen no respondió con la réplica de los Schlegel: «Si ellos no lo aprecian, yo sí»; por el contrario, se prometió a sí misma ser menos considerada con la servidumbre en el futuro. Y todo cuanto hizo, pensó y respiró fue una soterrada preparación para Paul. Paul era inevitable: Charles estaba comprometido con otra mujer, míster Wilcox era demasiado viejo y Evie demasiado joven; mistress Wilcox, por su parte, era distinta. Empezó a rodear al hermano ausente de un halo romántico, a personificar en él todo el esplendor de aquellos días felices, a sentir que con él estaría más cerca de aquel firme ideal. Ambos tenían la misma edad, le había dicho Evie. Todo el mundo consideraba a Paul más guapo que su hermano. Era más diestro con la escopeta, aunque jugaba peor al golf. Y así, cuando Paul apareció, radiante por el triunfo obtenido en sus exámenes y dispuesto a coquetear con cualquier chica guapa, Helen corrió a su encuentro y se le rindió el domingo por la noche.

Paul había estado hablando de su inminente exilio en Nigeria. Debería haber seguido hablando y permitir así que su huésped se recobrase de la primera impresión, pero vio palpitar agitadamente el pecho de Helen y aquello le halagó. Algo murmuró en su interior: «Esta chica permitirá que la beses, y es posible que no se repita una oportunidad semejante.» Así fue «cómo sucedió» o, mejor, cómo lo describió Helen a su hermana, utilizando palabras más crueles aún que las que yo he usado ahora. Pero la poesía, el encanto, la magia de aquel beso ¿cómo describirlos? A un inglés le resulta muy fácil sonreír despectivamente ante estos encuentros fugaces que la casualidad depara a los seres humanos, blanco idóneo para el cínico y el moralista. Nada más fácil que calificarlos de «emoción pasajera» e ignorar qué vivida fue la emoción antes de que pasara. En principio, esta inclinación al desprecio y al olvido no está mal, pues implica la idea de que la emoción es perecedera y de que el ser humano es capaz de relaciones más perdurables y no de meras descargas eléctricas. Pero hacemos mal en exagerar nuestro rechazo de los impulsos y en no admitir que son estos impulsos, tan

triviales, los que abren las puertas del paraíso. A Helen, en cualquier caso, la vida ya no habría de proporcionarle en el futuro nada tan intenso como aquel abrazo con un muchacho que apenas puso en él nada de su parte. Paul la hizo salir de la casa, donde había demasiada luz y corrían el peligro de ser sorprendidos, y la condujo por un sendero que él conocía junto al tronco del olmo gigantesco. La voz del hombre susurró en la oscuridad: «Te amo» en el preciso momento en que ella anhelaba amor. Más tarde, cuando la exigua personalidad de Paul se hubo desvanecido, permaneció la imagen que en aquel instante había creado. En los años que siguieron, Helen ya no volvió a encontrar nada igual.

—Lo comprendo —dijo Margaret—, al menos comprendo cuanto se puede comprender con respecto a estas cosas. Cuéntame ahora qué sucedió el lunes por la mañana.

—Todo terminó de pronto.

—¿Qué pasó, Helen?

—Verás, mientras me vestía aún era feliz; al bajar la escalera me sentía inquieta, y cuando entré en el comedor comprendí que todo iba mal. Allí estaba Evie... no sé cómo decirte... revolviendo la tetera, y míster Wilcox, leyendo el *Times.*

—¿Y Paul?, ¿estaba allí también?

—Sí. Charles le estaba contando no sé qué de unas acciones y la Bolsa... él parecía asustado.

Las dos hermanas podían transmitirse muchas impresiones por medio de indicaciones sutiles. Margaret intuyó el pánico latente en la escena y la siguiente aclaración de Helen no le sorprendió.

—¿Sabes? Cuando esta clase de hombres tiene miedo, es espantoso. Nosotras podemos estar asustadas, y otra clase de hombres, también... como papá, por ejemplo; pero no un hombre así. Al ver a los demás tan tranquilos y a Paul loco de terror por si yo decía algo incorrecto, sentí por un momento que toda la familia Wilcox era un fraude, un castillo hecho de periódicos, automóviles y palos de golf y que si ese castillo se derrumbaba, no encontraría detrás más que pánico y vacío.

—Yo no lo veo así. Los Wilcox me parecieron personas muy auténticas; en especial, la señora.

—Es cierto, yo tampoco lo veo así. Pero, ya ves: Parecía un hombre tan seguro, tan entero... no sé. En fin, como te decía, las cosas iban de mal en peor. Me di cuenta de que aquello no podía ser... de que nunca podría ser; así que aproveché que los demás se habían ido al jardín a practicar un poco de deporte y le dije a Paul: «Ayer cometimos una tontería.» Eso le alivió, aunque se quedó terriblemente avergonzado. Empezó a decirme que no tenía dinero, que no podía casarse. Vi que le resultaba muy doloroso y cambié de tema. Entonces me dijo él: «Tengo que pedirle perdón, miss Schlegel; no sé lo que pasó anoche», y yo le contesté: «Tampoco sé lo que me ocurrió a mí; no se preocupe.» Así nos separamos, hasta que me acordé de que te había escrito la noche anterior, se lo dije y le acometió de nuevo al pánico. Le pedí que te enviase un telegrama en mi nombre, porque sabía que vendrías o que harías algo por el estilo. Paul intentó coger el coche, pero Charles y su padre lo necesitaban para ir a la estación. Charles se ofreció a enviar el telegrama y tuve que decirle que no valía la pena, pues Paul me dijo que Charles lo leería y, aunque lo escribí varias veces, él insistió en que sospecharían algo. Al final se fue a pie con el pretexto de ir a comprar cartuchos, con lo cual, entre unas cosas y otras, enviamos el telegrama demasiado tarde. Fue la peor mañana que recuerdo haber pasado en mi vida. Paul me odiaba cada vez más y Evie no paraba de hablar de cricket hasta que estuve a punto de ponerme a chillar. Ahora no comprendo cómo pude soportar a Evie los días precedentes. Por fin Charles y míster Wilcox se fueron a la estación y entonces llegó el telegrama tuyo avisándome de que la tía Juley llegaba en tren. Paul dijo que yo lo había enredado todo... Fue horrible. Por suerte, mistress Wilcox estaba al corriente.

—¿Al corriente de qué?

—De todo; aunque nadie le dijo una palabra, creo que siempre estuvo al corriente de todo.

—Quizá te oyó.

—Supongo que sí, pero no deja de ser extraordinario. Cuando llegaron Charles y la tía Juley insultándose recíprocamente, apareció mistress Wilcox en el jardín y suavizó la situación. ¡Uf! A pesar de todo, fue un asunto desagradable. Pensar que... —suspiró.

—Pensar que ha de haber tanto telegrama y tanta furia porque un jovenzuelo y tú tenéis una relación fugaz —concluyó Margaret.

Helen asintió.

—Es algo que me hace reflexionar a menudo, ¿sabes? —continuó Margaret—, algo que me interesa muchísimo. La verdad es que existe una vida exterior con la que ni tú ni yo tenemos contacto y en la que cuentan los telegramas y la furia. En cambio las relaciones personales, a las que nosotras damos una importancia preeminente, no la tienen en ese mundo. Ahí, el amor equivale a compromiso matrimonial; la muerte, a funeral. Tengo ideas claras al respecto, pero mi duda estriba en sí esa vida exterior, que me parece a todas luces horribles, no será la vida real. Tiene, ¿cómo te diría?, tiene entidad, carácter... Y si, a la larga, las relaciones personales no conducirán a una especie de ñoñez sentimental.

—Es curioso, Meg, yo sentí lo mismo cuando vi que los Wilcox estaban de vuelta de todo y tenían siempre las riendas en la mano.

—¿Y ahora?, ¿ya no lo piensas?

—Recuerdo a Paul durante aquel desayuno —dijo Helen con voz tranquila—. Nunca lo olvidaré. No tenía nada a qué agarrarse. No, Meg, las relaciones personales son la auténtica vida. Ahora y siempre.

—Amén.

De este modo el episodio de los Wilcox pasó a ser un recuerdo, dejando tras de sí impresiones entremezcladas de dulzura y angustia. Las dos hermanas siguieron llevando la vida que Helen había catalogado como buena. Charlaban, bien entre sí, bien con otros, llenaban la casa de Wickham Place, alta y estrecha, de la gente que les agradaba o con la que creían poder entablar amistad, e incluso participaban en reuniones públicas, porque, a su manera, la política les interesaba, no al modo de los políticos, sino como un deseo de que la vida pública reflejase todo lo bueno que hay en la vida interior de las personas. La templanza, la tolerancia y la igualdad entre los sexos eran sus estandartes; por el contrario, no seguían nuestra política exterior en el Tíbet con la debida atención y, a veces, desdeñaban en su totalidad el Imperio Británico con un suspiro de perplejidad no exenta de admiración. Con gente así no se hace la Historia, desde luego, y el mundo sería gris y desangelado si

se compusiera exclusivamente de Schlegel, pero, siendo el mundo como es, probablemente las dos hermanas brillaban como dos luceros.

Unas palabras, ahora, sobre su origen. No eran «inglesas hasta la medula de los huesos», como su tía había afirmado en un rapto de condescendencia. Pero tampoco eran «alemanas de ésas, tan espantosas». Su padre había pertenecido a un tipo que abundaba en Alemania hace cincuenta años, que no ahora. No era el clásico alemán agresivo, tan grato a los periodistas ingleses, ni el clásico alemán familiar, tan grato al ingenio inglés. Más bien pertenecía al tipo de caballero rural de Hegel y Kant, idealista, dado a la ensoñación y cuyo imperialismo era el imperialismo del aire. No es que se le pudiera tildar de inactivo, pues había luchado fieramente contra Dinamarca, contra Austria y contra Francia, pero había luchado sin apreciar los resultados de la victoria. Atisbo un destello de verdad después de la batalla de Sedán, cuando vio volverse grises los bigotes teñidos de Napoleón, y otro destello cuando entró en París y vio los cristales rotos de las Tullerías. Vino la paz y fue la gloria: se habían convertido en un Imperio; pero él sabía que algo se había desvanecido, algo cuya pérdida no compensaba toda la Alsacia-Lorena. Alemania, como potencia comercial, como potencia naval, con colonias por aquí y política exterior por allá, con aspiraciones legítimas sobre otros territorios, podía impresionar a los demás, que se aprestaban a servirla con alma y vida. Él, por su parte, se abstuvo de recoger los frutos de la victoria y se nacionalizó inglés... Los miembros más conspicuos de su familia no se lo perdonaron jamás y dictaminaron que sus hijas, aunque no fueran «inglesas de ésas, tan espantosas», nunca serían «alemanas hasta la medula de los huesos». Había conseguido trabajo en una Universidad inglesa de provincias y allí se casó con la Pobre Emily (o con *Die Engländerin*, según otros) y, como ella tenía dinero, se trasladaron a Londres y conocieron a mucha gente. Pero sus ojos siempre estuvieron fijos al otro lado del mar. Siempre esperó que se disipasen las nubes del materialismo que oscurecían su tierra natal y que volviera a brillar la cálida luz intelectual de antaño. «¿Quieres decir con eso que los alemanes somos estúpidos, tío Ernst?», le preguntaba uno de sus sobrinos, altivo y magnífico. Y el tío Ernst respondía: «En mi opinión, sí. Usáis de la inteligencia, pero ya no os preocupáis por ella. A esto lo llamo yo estupidez.» Y viendo que el

altivo sobrino no replicaba, proseguía él: «Sólo os preocupáis de las cosas que podéis utilizar y, por ende, las colocáis en el orden siguiente: dinero, utilidad máxima; inteligencia, bastante útil; imaginación, sin utilidad alguna. No —atajó las protestas del otro—, vuestro pangermanismo no es más imaginativo que el imperialismo británico. Es propio de una mente vulgar, que se estremece con las magnitudes, pensar que mil millas cuadradas son mil veces más hermosas que una milla cuadrada y que un millón de millas cuadradas son casi el paraíso. Esto no es imaginación. Esto es el aniquilamiento de la imaginación. Cuando los poetas ingleses tratan de cantar la grandeza, mueren de muerte natural. También vuestros poetas están muriendo, y vuestros filósofos, y vuestros músicos, a los que Europa entera ha escuchado durante doscientos años. Desaparecidos, desaparecidos con las pequeñas Cortes que los sostuvieron. Desaparecidos con Esterhaz, con Weimar. ¿Cómo dices? ¿Vuestras Universidades? Ah, sí, tenéis hombres instruidos que recopilan más hechos que los hombres instruidos de Inglaterra. Recopilan hechos y más hechos... un imperio de hechos. Pero ¿quién arrojará un poco de luz sobre estos hechos?» Margaret escuchaba sentada en las rodillas del altivo sobrino.

Fue una educación única para las pequeñas. El altivo sobrino solía pasar en Wikcham Place un día acompañado de su aún más altiva esposa, convencidos ambos de que Alemania había sido designada por Dios para gobernar el mundo. Al día siguiente llegaba la tía Juley, convencida de que Gran Bretaña había sido designada para el mismo cometido por la misma autoridad. ¿Estaban en lo cierto las dos partes? En una ocasión, habiendo coincidido, Margaret les imploró con las manos juntas que discutieran el tema en su presencia. Todos enrojecieron, sin embargo, y se pusieron a hablar del tiempo. «Papá —gritó ella, que era una niña en extremo ofensiva—, ¿por qué no discuten este asunto, que es más interesante?» Y su padre, mirando ceñudo a las dos partes, respondió que no lo sabía. Entonces Margaret, ladeando la cabeza, comentó: «Para mí, hay dos cosas claras: o la voluntad de Dios está indecisa entre Inglaterra y Alemania, o ambos países desconocen la voluntad de Dios.» Una niña odiosa, sin duda, pero a los trece años había captado un dilema que mucha gente, en toda su vida, no logra percibir. Su cerebro volaba de un lado a otro y se desarrolló fuerte y flexible. La conclusión a la que llegó fue que cualquier individuo

está más próximo a lo invisible que ninguna organización, y jamás cambió de opinión al respecto.

Helen seguía el mismo camino, si bien de un modo más irresponsable. Se parecía a su hermana en carácter, pero era bonita y, por tanto, más susceptible de pasarlo bien. La gente se agrupaba a su alrededor con más facilidad, en especial cuando se trataba de nuevas amistades y este pequeño homenaje le complacía. Cuando murió su padre y se quedaron solas en Wickham Place, Helen acaparaba casi siempre toda la compañía, mientras Margaret, tan buena conversadora como su hermana, fracasaba en el intento. Ninguna de las dos se lamentaba por ello. Helen nunca se disculpó ni Margaret experimentó el más mínimo rencor. Pero la apariencia física influye en el carácter. Las dos hermanas eran muy parecidas durante la infancia, pero en la época del episodio de los Wilcox, sus métodos empezaban a divergir: la menor era más dada a atraer y, atrayendo, a ser atraída; la mayor iba directamente a lo suyo y aceptaba como parte del juego algún que otro fracaso accidental.

En cuanto a Tibby, poco puede decirse. Al comienzo de esta historia era un jovencito de dieciséis años, inteligente, dispéptico y difícil.

CAPÍTULO V

Está generalmente admitido que la *Quinta sinfonía* de Beethoven es el ruido más sublime que haya penetrado jamás en el oído humano. Satisface a todo el mundo, cualesquiera que sean la condición y características del oyente. Tanto si éste se parece a mistress Munt, que seguía subrepticiamente el ritmo con el pie cuando sonaba el tema (sin molestar al prójimo, por supuesto); o a Margaret, que sólo oía música; o a Helen, que veía héroes y naufragios en el flujo de las notas; o a Tibby, que estaba profundamente versado en contrapuntos y sostenía la partitura abierta en las rodillas; o a su prima, fräulein Mosebach, que recordaba a cada instante que Beethoven era *echt Deutsch*; o al joven acompañante de fräulein Mosebach, que no recordaba nada excepto a fräulein Mosebach; en cualquier caso y sea como sea, la pasión de su vida se intensifica y hay que admitir que este ruido, por dos chelines, resulta francamente barato. Es barato incluso si se oye en el Queen's Hall, la peor sala de conciertos de Londres (aunque no peor que el Free Trade Hall de Manchester) e incluso oído en el extremo izquierdo de la sala, donde los timbales retumban en la cabeza del hipotético oyente antes que el resto de la orquesta. Sí, aún así es barato.

—¿Con quién está hablando Margaret? —dijo al finalizar el primer movimiento mistress Munt, que se encontraba de nuevo en Londres, de visita en Wickham Place.

Helen recorrió con la mirada la larga fila que formaba su grupo y dijo que no lo sabía.

—¿Será alguno de esos jóvenes en los que está interesada?

—Eso espero —respondió Helen. La música la envolvió y no pudo detenerse a establecer la distinción que existe entre un joven al que se conoce y un joven en quien se tiene interés.

—Sois tan maravillosas al... ¡Huy, Virgen Santa, no se puede hablar!

Porque había comenzado el *andante*, muy bonito a pesar de tener un parecido familiar con todos los demás *andantes* compuestos por Beethoven y, en opinión de Helen, de desconectar a los héroes y los naufragios del primer movimiento de los héroes y duendes del tercero. Oyó el tema entero una vez y luego dejó vagar su atención, curioseando entre la audiencia, el órgano y la arquitectura. Censuró los flácidos cupidos que circundaban el techo del Queen's Hall, inclinados los unos sobre los otros en insípidos gestos y vestidos con pálidos pantalones en los que se reflejaba el sol de octubre. «¡Qué espantoso sería casarse con un hombre que se pareciera a esos cupidos!», pensó Helen. Beethoven empezaba a adornar el tema, así que Helen lo escuchó entero una vez más y luego sonrió a su prima Frieda. Pero Frieda estaba oyendo Música Clásica y no podía distraerse. También herr Liesecke parecía incapaz de dejarse distraer por una manada de caballos salvajes: tenía la frente arrugada, los labios separados, los quevedos en ángulo recto con la nariz y las manos blancas y gordezuelas posadas en las rodillas. Junto a él estaba la tía Juley, tan británica, empeñada en seguir el ritmo con los pies. ¡Qué hilera de tipos más interesantes! ¡Qué diversidad de influencias los había formado! Beethoven, tras susurrar con gran dulzura, suspiró —«Aaaaah»— y se acabó el *andante.* Aplausos y una ronda de *wunderschöning* y *prachtvolleying* por parte de la concurrencia alemana. Helen dijo a su tía:

—Ahora viene el movimiento más bonito: primero los duendes y luego un trío de elefantes bailando.

Tibby rogó a los presentes en general que se fijasen en el pasaje de transición ejecutado por el timbal.

—¿Por quién, querido?

—Por el timbal, tía Juley.

—No, fíjate en la parte en que crees que los duendes se han ido y vuelven —cuchicheó Helen mientras la música empezaba con un duende paseando tranquilamente de un extremo al otro del

universo. No eran criaturas agresivas y eso era lo que las hacía terribles a los ojos de Helen. Se limitaban a observar, de pasada, que no había en el mundo ni heroísmo ni esplendor. Tras el interludio de elefantes bailarines, regresaron los duendes y repitieron la observación por segunda vez. Helen no podía contradecirlos, porque una vez, y a todos los efectos, había sentido lo mismo y había visto abatirse los sólidos muros de la juventud. ¡Pánico y vacío! ¡Pánico y vacío! Los duendes tenían razón.

Su hermano levantó un dedo: era el pasaje de transición ejecutado por el timbal.

Beethoven, como si las cosas estuviesen llegando demasiado lejos, sujetaba a los duendes y los hacía hacer lo que él quería. Les dio un empujoncito y empezaron a caminar en clave mayor en lugar de hacerlo en clave menor, y entonces... sopló y se dispersaron. ¡Ráfagas de esplendor, dioses y semidioses luchando con inmensas espadas, color y fragancia derramados en el campo de batalla, grandiosa victoria, magnífica muerte! ¡Oh! El mundo estalló ante los ojos de Helen, que estiró las manos enguantadas como si se tratara de algo tangible. Todo destino era titánico; toda conquista, deseable; conquistadores y conquistados serían aplaudidos por igual por los ángeles de las más distantes estrellas.

¿Y los duendes?, ¿acaso no habían estado allí? ¿Eran sólo los fantasmas de la cobardía y de la falta de fe? ¿Bastaba un saludable impulso humano para ponerlos en fuga? Hombres como míster Wilcox o el presidente Roosevelt dirían que sí, pero Beethoven era más sabio. Los duendes habían estado allí. Podían volver... y volvieron. Era como si el esplendor de la vida pudiera hervir demasiado y disiparse en vapor y espuma. En su disolución se oía la nota terrible, ominosa, y un duende, con creciente malignidad, recorría el universo de un confín al otro. ¡Pánico y vacío! Hasta los flamantes muros del mundo podían caer.

Beethoven eligió un final feliz. Edificó de nuevo las murallas. Sopló por segunda vez y dispersó una vez más a los duendes. Devolvió las ráfagas de esplendor, el heroísmo, la juventud, la magnificencia de la vida y de la muerte y, entre profundos rugidos de alegría sobrehumana, condujo a la Quinta Sinfoní a a su fin. Pero los duendes estaban allí. Podían volver. Lo había expresado

valientemente y por eso se puede confiar en Beethoven cuando dice otras cosas.

Helen se abrió camino hacia la salida durante los aplausos. Deseaba estar sola. La música le había mostrado cuanto en su vida había sucedido o podía suceder. Lo había leído como en una revelación tangible, inalterable. Las notas significaban esto y aquello para ella, no podían significar otra cosa y tampoco la vida podía tener otro significado. Salió del edificio, bajó despacio las escaleras exteriores, aspirando el aire otoñal, y echó a andar hacia su casa.

—Margaret —dijo mistress Munt—, ¿se encuentra bien Helen?

—Oh, sí.

—Siempre se va a mitad de programa —dijo Tibby.

—Parece que la música le ha conmovido profundamente —dijo fräulein Mosebach.

—Perdone —dijo el joven desconocido de Margaret, que había estado preparando la frase durante un rato—, pero esa señorita se ha llevado mi paraguas por equivocación.

—¡Cielo santo! Lo siento muchísimo. Tibby, ve corriendo y alcanza a Helen.

—Me perdería las cuatro canciones graves.

—Tibby, cariño, tienes que ir.

—Por Dios, no tiene importancia —dijo el joven, un poco inquieto, a decir verdad, por su paraguas.

—Ya lo creo que sí. Tibby. ¡Tibby!

Tibby se levantó y se quedó hábilmente atrapado entre los respaldos de los asientos. Cuando hubo levantado el asiento, encontrado su sombrero y librado su persona de los restantes impedimentos, ya era «demasiado tarde» para alcanzar a Helen. Las cuatro canciones graves habían empezado y nadie podía moverse durante la ejecución.

—Mi hermana es muy distraída —murmuró Margaret.

—De ningún modo —contestó el joven; pero su voz sonó opaca y fría.

—Si me da usted su dirección...

—Oh, no, no, en absoluto —dijo él enrollando el gabán sobre sus rodillas.

Las cuatro canciones graves entraron en los oídos de Margaret. Brahms, con todos sus lamentos y plañidos, nunca había experimentado lo que se siente cuando se es sospechoso de robar un paraguas. Porque aquel joven mentecato pensaba que ella, Helen y Tibby habían estado poniendo en práctica un ardid y que si él les hubiese dado su dirección, habrían irrumpido en sus habitaciones a medianoche y le habrían robado también el bastón.

Cualquier dama se habría reído, pero Margaret se sintió afectada, porque aquello era un síntoma de sordidez. Confiar en el prójimo es un lujo que sólo los ricos se pueden permitir; no los pobres. Apenas Brahms dejó de quejarse, Margaret dio al joven su tarjeta y le dijo:

—Vivimos aquí. Si usted lo prefiere, puede venir por el paraguas al terminar el concierto. Lamento, con todo, causarle tanta molestia cuando la culpa ha sido enteramente nuestra.

El rostro del joven se iluminó levemente cuando vio que Wickham Place estaba en el West [3]. Daba pena verle corroído por la sospecha e incapaz, al mismo tiempo, de ser grosero por temor a que aquella gente tan bien vestida fuera honrada al fin y al cabo. A Margaret le pareció buena señal que dijera:

—Un programa muy bonito el de esta tarde, ¿verdad? —pues éste era el comentario con el que habrían iniciado la conversación si el paraguas no hubiese intervenido.

—La parte de Beethoven está muy bien —dijo Margaret, que no era una mujer de las que animan a su interlocutor—, pero Brahms no me gusta, ni la pieza de Mendelssohn que interpretaron al principio... y, ¡uf!, no soporto a Elgar, que viene ahora.

—¿Que qué? —dijo herr Liesecke, que había escuchado las últimas palabras de Margaret—. ¿No es bueno *Pompa y circunstancia?*

—¡Ay, Margaret, qué pesada! —protestó su tía—. He conseguido convencer a herr Liesecke para que se quede a oír *Pompa y circunstancia* y vienes tú y echas por el suelo todo mi trabajo. Tengo

unas ganas locas de que oiga lo que componemos *nosotros.* No deberías menospreciar a los compositores ingleses, Margaret, hija.

—Yo ya he oído esta composición en Stettin —dijo fräulein Mosebach—, en dos ocasiones. Es un poco... dramática.

—Frieda, tú desprecias la música inglesa, ya se sabe. Y el arte inglés y la literatura inglesa, exceptuando a Shakespeare, que era alemán. Está bien, Frieda, te puedes ir.

Los novios se rieron y se miraron el uno al otro. Movidos por un impulso común se levantaron y huyeron de *Pompa y circunstancia.*

—Es verdad —dijo herr Liesecke mientras se abría paso y alcanzaba el pasillo en el momento en que empezaba la música—, tenemos que hacer una visita en Finsbury Circus.

—¡Margaret! —susurró a voces la tía Juley—, ¡Margaret! Fräulein Mosebach se ha dejado su precioso bolsito en el asiento.

Sin lugar a dudas era el bolso de Frieda y contenía su agenda, su diccionario de bolsillo, su mapa de Londres y su dinero.

—¡Qué lata... qué familia! ¡Frieda! ¡Frieda!

—Sssst —chistaron los que degustaban la música.

—¡El número de Finsbury Circus al que iban...!

—Si me permiten... yo podría... —dijo el joven suspicaz enrojeciendo.

—¡Oh, sí! Se lo agradecería muchísimo.

Tomó el bolso (en cuyo interior tintineaba el dinero) y se deslizó pasillo arriba. Tuvo tiempo justo de alcanzarlos en la puerta y recibió una encantadora sonrisa de la joven alemana y una perfecta inclinación del caballero. Volvió a su sitio. La confianza que habían depositado en él era trivial, pero sintió que cancelaba la desconfianza que había experimentado hacia ellos y que probablemente no le engañarían con su paraguas. Aquel joven había sido engañado en el pasado —de mala manera, quizá arrolladoramente— y ahora dedicaba buena parte de sus energías a defenderse de los desconocidos. Pero aquella tarde, tal vez a causa de la música, percibió que en ciertas ocasiones hay que abandonarse o, si no, ¿de qué sirve vivir? Wickham Place, W., aun

presuponiendo un riesgo, era tan seguro como cualquier otra cosa y él estaba dispuesto a asumir el riesgo.

Y así, al finalizar el concierto, cuando Margaret dijo: «Vivimos muy cerca. Ahora precisamente voy para allí. ¿Puede usted venir conmigo y recogeremos su paraguas?», él contestó: «Gracias» pacíficamente y la siguió. Margaret habría preferido que aquel joven no fuera tan solícito en ayudar a las damas a bajar la escalera o en ir a buscar el programa —eran casi de la misma clase social para que sus modales no la humillaran—, pero lo encontraba interesante, en conjunto (en aquella época todo el mundo interesaba a las Schlegel en conjunto), por lo cual, mientras sus labios hablaban de cultura, su corazón planeaba invitarle a tomar el té.

—¡Qué cansada acaba una después de oír música! —dijo Margaret para empezar.

—¿Encuentra usted opresiva la atmósfera del Queen's Hall?

—Ay, sí, es horrible.

—Sin embargo, creo que la atmósfera del Covent Garden es aún más opresiva.

—¿Va usted a menudo al Covent Garden?

—Sí, cuando me lo permite mi trabajo, suelo ir al gallinero, a la Ópera.

Helen habría exclamado: «Yo también, ¡me encanta el gallinero!» y de este modo habría creado un vínculo afectivo con el joven. Helen sabía cómo hacer este tipo de cosas. Pero Margaret tenía una aversión casi enfermiza a «arrastrar a la gente», a «hacer que las cosas rodaran por sí solas». Había estado en el gallinero del Covent Garden, pero no «solía ir», prefería las localidades más caras; el gallinero no le encantaba, ni mucho menos. Así que no contestó.

—Este año he ido tres veces: a *Fausto*, a *Tosca* ya... ¿cómo se decía, *Tanhauser, Tanhoiser...?* Mejor no arriesgarse.

A Margaret no le gustaba ni *Tosca* ni *Fausto.* Y así, por una u otra razón, siguieron caminando en silencio, arrullados por la voz de mistress Munt que tenía dificultades con su sobrino.

—Me acuerdo del pasaje, Tibby, pero cuando cada instrumento es tan bonito, resulta difícil distinguir al uno del otro. Estoy segura de que Helen y tú me lleváis a los mejores conciertos. Ni una nota desacertada del principio al fin. Me habría gustado que nuestros amigos alemanes se hubieran quedado hasta el final.

—Vamos, tía Juley, estoy seguro de que no te has olvidado del timbal redoblando en do menor —se oyó decir a Tibby—. Nadie puede olvidarlo, es inconfundible.

—¿Un pasaje muy fuerte? —aventuró mistress Munt—. Desde luego, no pretendo ser una entendida en música —añadió al ver que había marrado el tiro—. Sólo que me gusta de la música... una cosa distinta. Pero, eso sí: sé cuando una cosa me gusta y cuándo no. A según quién le pasa lo mismo con la pintura. Entra en una Galería, miss Conter, por ejemplo, y en seguida dicen lo que sienten, cuadro por cuadro. Yo soy incapaz de hacerlo. Pero la música es diferente de la pintura, creo yo. Cuando se trata de música, estoy tan segura como pueda estarlo el que más, te lo aseguro, Tibby. Ya lo creo. Yo no soy de ésos que disfrutan con todo. Hubo una cosa, algo sobre un fauno, en francés, que a Helen le extasió y a mí, en cambio, me pareció de lo más tontorrón y superficial. Lo dije entonces y lo he mantenido siempre.

—¿Está usted de acuerdo? —preguntó Margaret—. ¿Cree usted que la música es diferente de la pintura?

—Yo su... supongo que sí —dijo el joven.

—Yo también. Sin embargo, mi hermana sostiene que son exactamente lo mismo. Discutimos mucho al respecto. Ella dice que yo soy muy rígida; y yo, que ella es una sentimental sin método —y, ya lanzada, gritó—: ¿No le parece a usted absurdo? ¿De qué sirven las artes si son intercambiables? ¿De qué sirve el oído si dice lo mismo que los ojos? El objetivo de Helen es trasladar las melodías al lenguaje de la pintura y los cuadros al lenguaje de la música. Es ingenioso, no lo niego, y dice cosas interesantes a este respecto, pero ¿qué se gana con ello, me pregunto yo? ¡Tonterías! ¡Es radicalmente falso! Si Monet es Debussy y Debussy es Monet, ninguno de los dos vale un pimiento... a mi modo de ver.

Era evidente que las dos hermanas se peleaban.

—Tome, por ejemplo, la sinfonía que acabamos de oír. Helen no la dejará en paz. Le da sentido del principio al fin; la convierte en literatura. Me pregunto si volverá el día en que la música se considere música. Con todo, no sé qué pensar. Ahí está mi hermano, ahí atrás. Él sí considera la música como música y, sin embargo, ¡Dios mío!, me irrita más que ninguna otra persona, me crispa los nervios. Con él no me atrevo a discutir.

Una familia desgraciada, pero talentosa.

—Por supuesto, el culpable de todo es Wagner. Wagner ha contribuido más que nadie en el siglo XIX a la confusión de las artes. Creo que la música se encuentra en una situación crítica, aunque extraordinariamente interesante. De vez en cuando, a lo largo de la historia, aparecen estos genios terribles, como Wagner, que conmocionan todas las ideas al mismo tiempo. Al principio, espléndido, pero luego queda tal cantidad de barro, tal embrollo, que no sé... Las ideas, que estaban bien claras, acaban por entremezclarse con una facilidad excesiva; ninguna sigue su curso de un modo definido. Esto es lo que ha hecho Wagner.

Las palabras de Margaret revoloteaban como pájaros en torno al joven. Si él pudiese hablar así, conquistaría el mundo. ¡Ah! ¡tener cultura! ¡pronunciar correctamente las nombres extranjeros! ¡estar bien informado, poder desarrollar seguro y fluido cualquier tema! Pero eso lleva años. Con una hora al mediodía y unas pocas horas por la noche, ¿cómo se puede competir con mujeres ociosas, que han leído desde la infancia? Su cabeza podía estar llena de nombres, incluso podía haber oído hablar de Monet y de Debussy; el problema era que no podía unirlos en una sola frase, no sabía darles un sentido; el problema era que no podía olvidar el paraguas perdido. Sí, el verdadero problema era el paraguas. El paraguas persistía, tras Monet y Debussy, con la insistencia del redoble de timbal. «Supongo que no le habrá pasado nada al paraguas —pensaba el joven—. En realidad, no me importa. Voy a pensar en la música. Supongo que no le habrá pasado nada a mi paraguas.» Al principio de la velada se había preocupado por las localidades. ¿Hizo bien en pagar dos chelines? Y antes aún se había preguntado: «¿Podré pasarme sin programa?» Siempre le había preocupado algo, siempre, desde que tenía memoria; siempre había algo que le distraía de la búsqueda de la belleza. Porque buscaba la belleza y,

por ello, las palabras de Margaret revoloteaban en torno a él como pájaros.

Margaret seguía hablando, diciendo de vez en cuando: «¿No cree usted? ¿No opina usted igual?» Y una de las veces se paró y dijo: «¡Oh, interrúmpame usted!», lo que dejó al joven aterrado. El joven no se sentía atraído por ella, aunque le inspiraba un reverente temor. Su figura era flaca, su cara parecía contener sólo ojos y dientes y las referencias a sus hermanos carecían de afectividad. Con toda su inteligencia y su cultura, aquella mujer sería probablemente, como explicaba miss Corelli, una de esas «esteticistas sin corazón». Por eso le resultó sorprendente —y alarmante— que ella dijera de pronto: «Espero que vendrá a tomar el té.»

—Espero que vendrá a tomar el té. Nos encantaría. ¡Le he desviado tanto de su camino!

Habían llegado a Wickham Place. El sol se había puesto y el remanso se cubría de una tenue neblina. A la derecha, la línea fantástica de los edificios se alzaba como una torre negra contra las tonalidades del crepúsculo; a la izquierda, las viejas mansiones levantaban un parapeto cuadrado e irregular contra el gris del cielo. Margaret tanteó en busca de la llave. Naturalmente, la había olvidado. Asió su paraguas por la contera, se inclinó sobre la verja y golpeó la ventana del salón.

—¡Helen! ¡Ábrenos!

—¡Ya voy! —dijo una voz.

—¡Te has llevado el paraguas de este caballero!

—¿Me he llevado el qué? —dijo Helen abriendo la puerta—. Oh, pase usted. Encantada.

—Helen, haz el favor de no ser tan atolondrada. Te llevaste el paraguas de este caballero del Queen's Hall y ha tenido que molestarse en venir a buscarlo.

—Lo siento mucho —exclamó Helen con la cabellera revuelta. Se había quitado el sombrero al llegar y se había apoltronado en una enorme butaca del salón—. No hago otra cosa que robar paraguas. Lo siento muchísimo. Pase y coja uno. ¿El suyo tiene

mango de gancho o mango de pomo? El mío lo tiene de pomo o, al menos, el que yo creo que es mío.

Encendieron las luces y empezaron a registrar el vestíbulo. Helen, que había olvidado bruscamente la Quinta Sinfoní a, iba comentando con gritos agudos:

—¡Tú no hables, Meg! Una vez le robaste la chistera a un anciano. Sí, sí, tía Juley, eso hizo. Es un hecho probado. Creyó que eran sus manguitos. ¡Cielo santo! Se me ha caído el letrero de la puerta. ¿Dónde está Frieda? Tibby, ¿por qué no...? Ay, no recuerdo qué iba a decir. No era eso, pero di a las criadas que preparen el té aprisa. ¿Qué le parece este paraguas? —lo abrió—. No, las costuras están rotas. Es un paraguas asqueroso. Debe de ser mío.

Pero no lo era.

El joven arrebató el paraguas de las manos de Helen, murmuró unas palabras de agradecimiento y huyó con el paso menudo de un oficinista.

—¿Pero no se queda usted...? —exclamó Margaret—. Helen, ¡cuidado que eres idiota!

—¿Qué hice mal?

—¿No ves que le has asustado? Quería que se quedase a tomar el té. No tenías que haber hablado de robos, ni de los agujeros del paraguas. No viste la desazón pintada en su rostro... ¡Ahora ya es inútil! —añadió al ver que Helen se precipitaba a la calle gritando: «¡Eh, espere!»

—Creo que ha sido mejor así —opinó mistress Munt—. No sabemos nada de ese joven, Margaret, y el salón está lleno de objetos pequeños y tentadores.

Pero Helen gritó:

—¡Tía Juley! ¿cómo puedes decir una cosa así? Me haces sentir aún más avergonzada. Preferiría que fuera un ladrón y se llevara las cucharillas que haber... En fin, supongo que tendré que cerrar la puerta. Un error más de Helen.

—Sí, creo que podríamos haber pagado las cucharillas en concepto de renta —dijo Margaret, y al ver la perplejidad de su tía continuó—: ¿No recuerdas? «Renta.» Era una de las expresiones de

papá. Renta que se paga por un ideal, por la fe en la naturaleza humana. ¿Recuerdas cómo confiaba en los extraños? Y si le engañaban, solía decir: «Es mejor ser engañado que ser suspicaz.» Decía que el abuso de confianza es obra del hombre, pero el exceso de desconfianza es obra del diablo.

—Algo creo recordar —dijo mistress Munt con acritud, porque habría deseado añadir: «Fue una suerte que tu padre se casara con una mujer rica.» Pero como no habría sido correcto, se contentó con decir—: Podría haber robado las miniaturas de Ricketts.

—Mejor —dijo Helen con tozudez.

—No —dijo Margaret—, estoy de acuerdo con la tía Juley. Prefiero desconfiar de la gente que perder mis Ricketts. Todo tiene un límite.

Tibby, que consideraba el incidente desprovisto de interés, se fue a la cocina a ver si había madalenas para el té. Calentó la tetera con una habilidad casi excesiva, rechazó el Orange Pekoe que había preparado la criada, echó cinco cucharadas de un té de superior calidad, llenó la tetera de agua hirviendo e instó a las mujeres a que se apresurasen para no perder el aroma.

—Ya vamos, tía Tibby —gritó Helen, mientras Margaret, de nuevo pensativa, decía:

—En cierto sentido, desearía que tuviéramos un chico de verdad en casa. Un chico interesado en el trato con los demás hombres. Eso facilitaría mucho las cosas.

—Eso mismo pienso yo —dijo su hermana—. A Tibby sólo le interesan las mujeres espirituales que cantan a Brahms —y cuando se reunieron con él, le dijo en tono cortante—: ¿Por qué no recibiste a aquel joven, Tibby? Tienes que hacer de anfitrión alguna vez. Tendrías que haber tomado su sombrero y haberle insistido para que se quedara, en lugar de dejar que unas mujeres chillonas lo aventasen.

Tibby suspiró y dejó caer un mechón de pelo sobre la frente.

—Es inútil hacerse el importante. Te estoy hablando en serio.

—Deja en paz a Tibby —dijo Margaret que no soportaba que se metieran con su hermano.

—Esta casa es un gallinero —masculló Helen.

—¡Virgen Santísima! —protestó mistress Munt—. ¡Cómo puedes decir unas cosas tan horribles! Me sorprende la cantidad de hombres que tenéis aquí. Si hay algún peligro, es precisamente el contrario.

—Helen se refiere a que no es la clase de hombres que debería ser.

—No, no quise decir esto tampoco —rectificó Helen—. Tenemos la clase de hombres que debe ser, pero del lado incorrecto. Y digo que esto es culpa de Tibby. Tendría que haber algo en la casa... un... un no sé qué.

—¿Un toque de los W., quizá?

Helen sacó la lengua.

—¿Quiénes son los W.? —preguntó Tibby.

—Son unos que conocemos Meg, la tía Juley y yo, y que tú no conoces, así que cállate.

—Supongo que ésta es una casa de mujeres —dijo Margaret— y así debemos aceptarlo. No, tía Juley, no quiero decir que esta casa esté llena de mujeres. Trato de decir algo mucho más sutil. Quiero decir que ya era irrevocablemente femenina aun en vida de papá. Estoy segura de que lo entiendes. Bien, te daré otro ejemplo. Te extrañará, pero no importa. Supón que la reina Victoria diera una fiesta y que los invitados fueran Leighton, Millais, Swinburne, Rossetti, Meredith, Fitzgerald, etc. ¿Supones que el ambiente de la fiesta sería artístico? ¡Qué va! Hasta las sillas en que se sentaran lo notarían. De modo que nuestra casa ha de ser forzosamente femenina y lo único que podemos hacer es procurar que no sea afeminada. Al igual que otra casa, que podría citar pero no cito, es irrevocablemente masculina y lo único que sus habitantes pueden hacer es procurar que no sea brutal.

—Una casa que supongo que será la de los W. —dijo Tibby.

—No te vamos a explicar nada de los W., pequeño —dijo Helen —, así que no le des más vueltas. Y, por otra parte, me trae sin cuidado que lo averigües, de modo que no te creas que eres muy listo, en cualquier caso. Dadme un cigarrillo.

—Contribuyes en lo que puedes, ¿eh? —dijo Margaret—. El salón está cargado de humo.

—Quizá si tú también fumaras, la casa se volvería súbitamente masculina. El ambiente es probablemente una cuestión de detalles. Incluso en la fiesta de la reina Victoria, si algo hubiese sido un poco diferente... quizá si hubiese llevado un traje de cóctel en vez de un vestido de satén color magenta...

—Con un mantón indio en los hombros...

—Cerrado en el pecho con un broche de piedra...

Una explosión de risa irrespetuosa —debe recordarse que eran medio alemanas— celebró estas sugerencias y Margaret dijo con aire pensativo:

—Qué inconcebible sería que a la familia real le interesara el Arte.

Y la conversación se fue desviando más y más y el cigarrillo de Helen se volvió ascua en la oscuridad y los pisos de enfrente dejaron ver sus ventanas iluminadas que se apagaban y se encendían y se volvían a desvanecer incesantemente. Tras ellos, la avenida rugía suavemente en un flujo incesante, mientras al Este, invisible tras los humos de Wapping, se levantaba la bruma.

—Ahora que me acuerdo, Margaret, deberíamos haber hecho entrar a aquel joven en el comedor. Sólo están los platos de mayólica y no hay quien los despegue de la pared. Lamento que no se haya quedado a tomar el té.

Aquel pequeño incidente había impresionado a las tres mujeres más de lo que pudiera creerse. Quedó latente como el paso de un duende, como una leve insinuación de que no todo iba bien en el mejor de los mundos y de que, bajo la supraestructura de la riqueza y el arte, vagaba un joven enfermizo que había recobrado su paraguas, es cierto, pero que no había dejado tras de sí ni dirección ni nombre.

CAPÍTULO VI

En esta historia los pobres no tienen lugar. Son inconcebibles y sólo accesibles a los políticos y a los poetas. Esta historia trata de gente bien o de aquellos que están obligados a simular que lo son. El joven, Leonard Bast, estaba en el límite. No había caído en el abismo, pero lo percibía; a veces algún conocido suyo se precipitaba en él y dejaba de existir para el mundo. Sabía que era pobre y solía admitirlo; pero habría muerto antes que confesarse inferior al rico. Esto podrá parecer espléndido por su parte, pero que era inferior a la mayoría de los ricos está fuera de toda duda. No era tan distinguido como el término medio de los ricos, ni tan inteligente, ni tan sano, ni tan digno de afecto. Su cuerpo y su mente habían sufrido desnutrición porque era pobre; y porque era moderno, uno y otra exigían más y mejor nutrición. Si hubiera vivido unos siglos antes, en las brillantes y coloristas civilizaciones del pasado, habría gozado de un status definido, su rango y sus ingresos habrían sido congruentes. Pero hoy en día el ángel de la Democracia ha alzado el vuelo oscureciendo las clases sociales con sus alas de cuero y ha proclamado: «Todos los hombre son iguales... es decir, todos los hombres que poseen paraguas», y así, el joven se había visto obligado a reafirmar su distinción para no caer en el abismo donde nada cuenta y donde los asertos de la Democracia se vuelven inaudibles.

A medida que se alejaba de Wickham Place su primera preocupación fue demostrarse a sí mismo que valía tanto como cualquiera de las Schlegel. Oscuramente herido en su orgullo, intentaba herirlas a ellas a su vez. Probablemente no eran auténticas damas. ¿Las auténticas damas le habrían invitado a tomar el té? Sí, sí, claro, eran ariscas y frías. A cada paso acrecía su

sentimiento de superioridad. ¿Una auténtica dama hubiese hablado de robar paraguas? A lo mejor, después de todo, eran ladronas y si él hubiera entrado en la casa le habrían aplicado a la cara un pañuelo empapado en cloroformo. Caminó complacido hasta el Parlamento. Allí su estómago vacío hizo valer sus derechos y le hizo ver que era un majadero.

—Buenas noches, míster Bast.

—Buenas, míster Dealtry.

—Hermosa noche.

—Hermosa, sí.

Dealtry, un compañero de la oficina, se alejó y Leonard se quedó dudando entre tomar el tranvía hasta donde éste pudiera llevarle por un penique o caminar. Decidió caminar —no es bueno perder el control y ya había gastado bastante en el Queen's Hall—, cruzó Westminster Bridge frente a Saint Thomas Hospital y atravesó el inmenso túnel que pasa bajo la línea del South-Western, en Vauxhall. En el túnel se detuvo y escuchó el bramido de los trenes. Una punzada le atravesó la cabeza y tuvo conciencia de la forma exacta de las cuencas de los ojos. Avanzó una milla más y no aflojó el paso hasta llegar a la entrada de una calle llamada Camelia Road, donde estaba, en aquella época, su casa.

Allí se detuvo una vez más y miró recelosamente a derecha e izquierda, como un conejo a punto de meterse en su agujero. Un bloque de pisos, construido con extrema baratura, se alzaba a cada lado. Más adelante había otros dos bloques en construcción y tras ellos estaban demoliendo una vieja casa para levantar un par más. Esta escena puede verse en todo Londres, sea cual sea el lugar: ladrillo y hormigón levantándose y cayendo a medida que la ciudad recibe más y más gente en su suelo. Camelia Road pronto parecería una fortaleza y dominaría, durante un tiempo, sobre los parajes circundantes. Pero sólo durante un tiempo, pues ya existían planes para levantar nuevos bloques en Magnolia Road. Y dentro de unos años, los bloques de ambas calles serán derribados seguramente y nuevos edificios de dimensiones inimaginables hoy en día se alzarán donde éstos hayan caído.

—Buenas, míster Bast.

—Buenas, míster Cunningham.

—Cosa seria el descenso de la natalidad en Manchester.

—¿Cómo dice?

—Cosa seria el descenso de la natalidad en Manchester —repitió míster Cunningham golpeando el periódico dominical en el que se anunciaba la calamidad en cuestión.

—Ah, sí —dijo Leonard, que no estaba dispuesto a reconocer que no había comprado el periódico dominical.

—Si esto sigue así, la población de Inglaterra será estacionaria en 1960.

—Hombre, no diga eso.

—Para mí es una cosa seria, ¿no?

—Buenas noches, míster Cunningham.

—Buenas noches, míster Bast.

Leonard entró en el bloque B y se dirigió, no escaleras arriba, sino escaleras abajo, hacia lo que los agentes de la propiedad llaman bajos y el resto de los mortales sótano. Abrió la puerta y gritó: «¡Hola!» con la pseudoalegría de un Cockney. No hubo respuesta. «Hola», repitió. La pieza estaba vacía, aunque la luz eléctrica se había quedado encendida. Una expresión de alivio iluminó su cara y se dejó caer en el sillón.

La pieza contenía, además del sillón, dos sillas, un piano, un velador y un *cosy corner.* Una de las paredes estaba ocupada por una ventana, la otra, por una repisa erizada de cupidos. Frente a la ventana estaba la puerta y, junto a la puerta, una librería. Sobre el piano se hallaba extendida una de las obras maestras de Maud Goodman. Era una estancia coqueta y agradable cuando las cortinas estaban corridas, las luces encendidas y la estufa de gas apagada. Pero acusaba esa nota de provisionalidad que suele percibirse en las viviendas modernas, que se obtienen con facilidad y pueden abandonarse con facilidad.

Cuando Leonard se estaba quitando las botas, dio un golpe seco al velador y una fotografía enmarcada, honoríficamente situada sobre la mesa, resbaló, cayó en la chimenea y se hizo añicos. Leonard dijo unas palabrotas con desinterés y recogió la fotografía.

Representaba a una joven llamada Jacky y había sido tomada en la época en que las jóvenes llamadas Jacky solían retratarse con la boca abierta. Unos dientes de deslumbrante blancura corrían a lo largo de las mandíbulas de Jacky y torcían a un lado su cabeza de puro grandes y numerosos. Créanme, aquella sonrisa era sencillamente espléndida. Ahora bien, si hemos de ser puntillosos y consideramos que la verdadera alegría proviene de los ojos, habremos de reconocer que los ojos de Jacky disentían de su sonrisa: eran ávidos y hambrientos.

Leonard intentó recoger los fragmentos de cristal, se cortó un dedo y volvió a proferir tacos. Una gota de sangre cayó sobre el marco, otra siguió a la primera yendo a caer sobre la fotografía. Renegó con más energía y corrió a la cocina, donde se lavó las manos. La cocina tenía el mismo tamaño que la salita de estar. Al otro extremo de la cocina estaba el dormitorio. No había más. Leonard había alquilado el apartamento amueblado: ningún objeto le pertenecía salvo la fotografía enmarcada, los cupidos y los libros.

—¡Maldita sea, maldita sea! —murmuraba el joven junto con otras palabras aprendidas de hombres de más edad.

Se llevó la mano a la frente y dijo: «¡Maldito sea todo...!», lo cual significaba algo distinto. Se calmó, bebió un poco de té, negro y silente, que sobrevivía en un estante, se tragó unas polvorientas migajas de tarta y volvió a la sala de estar, se aposentó y empezó a leer un libro de Ruskin.

Siete millas al norte de Venecia...

¡Con qué perfección empieza este famoso capítulo! ¡Qué supremo dominio de la admonición y de la poesía! El rico nos habla desde su góndola.

Siete millas al norte de Venecia los bancos de arena, que cerca de la ciudad emergen ligeramente sobre el nivel del agua, alcanzan gradualmente un nivel más alto y acaban por unirse formando un entramado de marismas salinas, elevados aquíy alláen forma de ribazos e interceptados por estrechos brazos de mar.

Leonard intentaba crearse un estilo a imitación de Ruskin, a quien consideraba el más grande maestro de la prosa inglesa. Siguió leyendo con obstinación, anotando ocasionalmente.

> *Consideremos por separado cada una de estas características, empezando (pues de los capiteles ya hemos hablado lo suficiente) por el rasgo más peculiar de esta iglesia: su luminosidad.*

¿Qué enseñanza se podía extraer de esta delicada frase? ¿Cómo podría él, Leonard, adaptarla a las necesidades de su vida cotidiana? ¿Cómo introducirla, con las modificaciones pertinentes, en la próxima carta a su hermano el sacristán? Por ejemplo:

«Consideremos por separado cada una de estas características, empezando (pues de su falta de ventilación ya hemos hablado lo suficiente) por el rasgo más peculiar de este apartamento: su oscuridad.»

Algo le dijo que las modificaciones no funcionaban; y ese algo, lo supiera o no, era el espíritu de la prosa inglesa. «Mi apartamento es tan oscuro como apestoso.» Éstas eran las palabras y no otras.

Y la voz de la góndola siguió fluyendo, entonando la salmodia del esfuerzo y el autosacrificio, preñada de elevados propósitos, preñada de belleza, preñada incluso de simpatía y amor al hombre, eludiendo, sin embargo, todo aquello que en la vida de Leonard era real y persistente. Porque era la voz de alguien que jamás había estado hambriento, ni sucio, de alguien que no había podido intuir con éxito lo que son la suciedad y el hambre.

Leonard escuchaba la voz con reverencia. Sentía que escucharla le hacía bien y que si continuaba con Ruskin, los conciertos en el Queen's Hall y los cuadros de Watts, podría algún día sacar la cabeza fuera del agua turbia y ver el universo. Creía en la conversión súbita, una creencia que, acertada o no, resulta particularmente atractiva a las mentes que aún están verdes. Es la base de la religión popular y domina las transacciones bursátiles en el mundo de los negocios, convirtiéndose en ese «poquito de suerte» que explica todos los éxitos y todos los fracasos. «Si tuviera

un poquito de suerte, todo se arreglaría...» «Ha conseguido una magnífica casa en Streatham y un Fiat de 20 CV, pero, claro está, ha tenido suerte...» «Siento mucho que mi esposa se haya retrasado tanto, pero siempre tiene la mala suerte de perder el tren.» Leonard había superado esta idea: creía en el esfuerzo y en la preparación constante para el cambio que deseaba. Pero carecía del concepto de cultura como herencia que se adquiere paso a paso: confiaba en llegar a la Cultura súbitamente, como los adventistas confían en llegar a Jesús. Las Schlegel habían llegado, habían realizado el sortilegio, habían tomado las riendas en sus manos, de una vez por todas. Y, mientras tanto, su apartamento era tan oscuro como apestoso.

En aquel momento oyó un ruido en la escalera. Leonard introdujo la tarjeta de Margaret entre las páginas de Ruskin y abrió la puerta. Entró una mujer de la cual sería fácil decir que no era respetable. Su apariencia era terrible. Parecía hecha de cordeles y tiradores —cintas, cadenillas, collares de cuentas que tintineaban y se enredaban entre sí—, y llevaba un boa de plumas azules arrollado al cuello, con los extremos colgando a distinta altura. Una doble ristra de perlas envolvía su garganta desnuda; los brazos, descubiertos hasta el codo, podían detectarse en el hombro a través de una puntilla barata. Su sombrero, lleno de flores, parecía uno de esos cestillos de fruta cubiertos de tela en los que plantábamos, de niños, semillas de mostaza y de berro y que unas veces germinaban y otras no. En cuanto a su cabellera o, mejor dicho, sus cabelleras, eran demasiado complicadas para ser descritas, pero un sistema caía sobre su espalda en forma de espesa mata mientras otro, creado para más altos destinos, formaba bucles sobre su frente. La cara... no importa. Era la cara de la fotografía, pero con más años encima y sus dientes no eran tan numerosos como el retrato sugería y, ciertamente, no tan blancos. En efecto, Jacky había dejado atrás la primavera de la vida, comoquiera que pudiese haber sido esa primavera. Declinaba hacia los años grises más aprisa que la mayoría de las mujeres y la expresión de sus ojos lo traslucía.

—¿Qué tal? —dijo Leonard saludando la aparición con alegría y ayudándola a desprenderse del boa.

Jacky, en tono hosco, respondió:

—¿Qué tal?

—¿Has estado fuera? —preguntó él. La pregunta podrá parecer superflua, pero no debía de serlo, pues la mujer contestó:

—No — y añadió—: ¡Qué cansada estoy!

—¿Estás cansada?

—¿Cómo?

—Estoy cansado —dijo él, colgando el boa.

—Oh, Len, estoy muy cansada.

—Estuve en el concierto del que te hablé —dijo Leonard.

—¿En el qué?

—Y vine tan pronto acabó.

—¿Ha venido alguien? —preguntó Jacky.

—No, que yo sepa. Encontré a míster Cunningham en la calle y cambiamos impresiones.

—¿Cómo, no era míster Cunningham?

—Sí, míster Cunningham.

—He ido a tomar el té a casa de una amiga.

Una vez hubo expuesto al mundo su secreto, e incluso esbozado el nombre de la amiga, Jacky no prosiguió sus experimentos en el difícil y fatigoso arte de la conversación. Nunca había sido una gran conversadora. Aun en sus días fotográficos, había usado de su sonrisa y de su figura para atraer, y ahora que estaba

para el retiro,

para el retiro,

amigos, estoy para el retiro

seguía sin saber usar de la lengua. Algunos sonidos (de los que acabamos de dar una muestra) salían todavía de sus labios, pero la expresión hablada era rara en ella.

Se sentó en las rodillas de Leonard y empezó a hacerle caricias. Era a la sazón una mujer maciza de treinta y tres años y su peso hizo daño al joven, aunque éste no dijo nada. «¿Estás leyendo un

libro?», preguntó Jacky, y él: «Es un libro» y se lo quitó de las manos. La tarjeta de Margaret cayó al suelo y quedó boca abajo. Leonard murmuró: «El punto.» —Len...

—¿Qué hay? —preguntó él con cansancio, porque Jacky sólo tenía un tema de conversación cuando se sentaba en sus rodillas.

—¿Me quieres?

—Jacky, ya sabes que sí. ¿Cómo puedes preguntarme una cosa semejante?

—Me quieres, ¿verdad, Len?

—Claro que sí.

Una pausa. Aún faltaba otro extremo a tocar.

—Len...

—¿Qué hay?

—Len, ¿lo harás, verdad?

—No quiero que vuelvas a preguntármelo —dijo el joven, experimentando un repentino arrebato—. Te he prometido que me casaría contigo en cuanto llegue a la mayoría de edad, y basta. Mi palabra es mi palabra. Te he prometido casarme contigo en cuanto cumpla los veintiún años, no puedo estar preocupándome por eso constantemente. Ya tengo bastantes preocupaciones. No voy a echarte cuando haya gastado todo el dinero, y no sólo por haberte dado mi palabra. Mira, soy inglés, y nunca me vuelvo atrás cuando quedo en una cosa. Jacky, sé razonable. Por supuesto que me casaré contigo. Pero deja de darme la lata.

—¿Cuándo es tu cumpleaños, Len?

—Te lo he dicho mil veces. El once de noviembre. Ahora, levántate de mis rodillas: alguien tiene que hacer la cena, digo yo.

Jacky fue al dormitorio y empezó a arreglar su sombrero. Esto quiere decir que empezó a insuflarle breves soplidos. Leonard puso en orden la salita de estar y empezó a preparar la cena. Metió un penique en la ranura del contador del gas y a poco el apartamento estaba impregnado de humo metálico. Por algún extraño motivo no lograba recobrar la calma y mientras cocinaba seguía quejándose con amargura.

—Es malo que no confíen en uno. Me haces sentir como un bruto, cuando he simulado ante todo el mundo que eres mi esposa. Está bien, está bien, serás mi esposa. Ya te he comprado el anillo y he alquilado este apartamento amueblado. Es más de lo que puedo permitirme. Y todavía no estás satisfecha... Tampoco he dicho la verdad cuando he escrito a mi casa —bajó la voz—. Él lo impediría —repitió en un tono de horror que resultaba un poco excesivo—. Mi hermano lo impediría. Obro en contra de todo el mundo, Jacky.

»Así soy yo, Jacky. No hago ningún caso de las opiniones ajenas. Yo sigo adelante, eso es. Así he sido siempre. No soy uno de esos tipos débiles, dubitativos, qué va. Si una mujer está en apuros, yo no la dejo en la estacada. No, yo no soy de esos, gracias a Dios.

»Y te voy a decir otra cosa. Me propongo mejorar por medio de la Literatura y el Arte, adquirir una perspectiva más amplia, ¿cómo te diría...? Por ejemplo, cuando has llegado, estaba leyendo *Las piedras de Venecia*, de Ruskin. No lo digo para darme tono, sino para que veas la clase de hombre que soy. Y te aseguro que disfruté con el concierto de esta tarde.

A todo esto, Jacky permanecía indiferente. Cuando la cena estuvo lista, y no antes, salió del dormitorio y dijo:

—Pero me quieres, ¿verdad?

Empezaron con una sopa concentrada que Leonard había disuelto en agua caliente. Le siguió un plato de lengua —un cilindro de carne jaspeada, con un poco de gelatina por arriba y mucha grasa amarillenta por debajo— y la cena finalizó con otro concentrado disuelto en agua (pudín de piña) preparado por Leonard a primera hora. Jacky comía de buena gana, mirando ocasionalmente a su hombre con aquellos ojos ávidos, a los que nada en el resto de su apariencia correspondía y que, sin embargo, parecían desvelar su alma. Y Leonard trataba de convencer a su estómago de que estaba tomando unos alimentos verdaderamente nutritivos.

Después de cenar, fumaron e intercambiaron algunas frases. Jacky observó que su retrato se había roto. Leonard encontró la ocasión de hacer notar, por segunda vez, que había vuelto directamente a casa después del concierto en el Queen's Hall. Jacky se sentó en sus rodillas. Los habitantes de Camelia Road caminaban

en una y otra dirección frente a la ventana, a la altura de sus cabezas, y la familia que vivía en la planta baja empezó a cantar *Oye, mi alma, es el Señor.*

—Esta canción me da grima —dijo Leonard.

Jacky dijo que, por su parte, consideraba la canción muy bonita.

—No: tocaré algo bonito para ti. Levántate un momento, cariño.

Fue al piano y tocó un poco de Grieg. Tocaba mal, de un modo mediocre, pero el recital no dejó de surtir efecto, porque Jacky manifestó que se iba a dormir. Cuando hubo desaparecido, un súbito interés acometió al joven, que se puso a pensar en lo que había dicho sobre la música la extraña miss Schlegel, aquella que torcía la cara el hablar. Sus pensamientos se volvieron tristes y envidiosos. Ay, aquella chica llamada Helen, que le había birlado el paraguas, y la chica alemana, que le había sonreído graciosamente, y herr no sé qué, y la tía no sé cuántos, y el hermano... todos con las riendas en la mano. Todos habían ascendido por la estrecha escalinata de Wickham Place al amplio salón, adonde él nunca podría seguirlos, aunque leyera diez horas diarias. No, no era bueno este continuo anhelo. Unos nacen cultos; los otros, es mejor que se dediquen a cosas más fáciles. Ver la vida en su totalidad no era lo indicado para personas como él.

De la oscuridad, más allá de la cocina, una voz le llamó:

—Len.

—¿Estás en la cama? —preguntó él arrugando la frente.

—Mmmm.

—Muy bien.

Jacky volvió a llamarle.

—Tengo que limpiar las botas para mañana —contestó él.

Jacky volvió a llamarle.

—Me gustaría acabar este capítulo.

—¿El qué?

Leonard cerró los oídos a la voz de Jacky.

—¿Qué es?

—No es nada, Jacky, estoy leyendo un libro.

—¿Qué?

—¿Qué? —contestó él remedando su sordera.

Jacky volvió a llamarle.

Ruskin, por entonces, había visitado Torcello y ordenó a los gondoleros que le condujeran a Murano. Mientras se deslizaba por las susurrantes lagunas, se le ocurrió que la estupidez no prevalecería contra el poder de la Naturaleza, ni su belleza se vería ensombrecida por la miseria de los individuos como Leonard.

CAPÍTULO VII

—¡Oh, Margaret —gritó su tía a la mañana siguiente—, ha ocurrido una desgracia! No puedo dejarte sola.

La gran desgracia no era nada serio. Uno de los pisos amueblados de enfrente acababa de ser alquilado por la familia Wilcox, «que sin duda venía a Londres con miras a introducirse en sociedad». No tiene nada de particular que mistress Munt hubiera sido la primera en descubrir el infortunio, ya que su interés por los pisos en cuestión la llevaba a espiar el menor cambio con una incansable meticulosidad. En teoría, los despreciaba —echaban a perder el carácter señorial de la zona, tapaban el sol, albergaban a gente vulgar—, pero, en realidad, encontraba doblemente interesantes las visitas a Wickham Place desde que habían levantado las Wickham Mansions y se enteraba de más cosas en dos días que sus sobrinas en dos meses o que su sobrino en dos años. Solía pasear por delante, trababa conversación con los porteros y les preguntaba cuál era el alquiler, exclamando, por ejemplo: «¡Cómo! ¿Ciento veinte por unos bajos? ¡Así no los alquilarán nunca!» Y los porteros le respondían: «Hay que intentarlo, señora.» Los ascensores principales, los ascensores de servicio y el almacén de carbón —una gran tentación para un portero deshonesto— no tenían secretos para la buena señora, lo cual era, a fin de cuentas, un respiro en la atmósfera político-económico-estética que reinaba en la casa de los Schlegel.

Margaret recibió con calma la información y discrepó de que aquello fuese a cubrir de nubes la existencia de la pobre Helen.

—Helen no es una chica abúlica —explicó a su tía—. Tiene infinidad de cosas y de personas en que pensar. Dio un paso en falso

con los Wilcox y está tan deseosa como nosotras de no tener nada más que ver con ellos.

—Para ser una chica inteligente, querida, hay que ver qué cosas tan raras dices. Helen tendrá algo que ver con ellos ahora que viven enfrente. Puede encontrarse con Paul en la calle y no le va a negar el saludo.

—Por supuesto que no. Anda, ven, vamos a arreglar las flores. Lo que quería decirte es que su voluntad de interesarse por él ha muerto y, siendo así, ¿qué importa lo demás? Aquel desastroso episodio, en el que te comportaste tan gentilmente, no hizo sino matar un nervio en Helen. El nervio está muerto y ya nunca le volverá a molestar. Lo único que cuenta es lo que a uno le interesa. Saludos, llamadas, intercambio de tarjetas, una cena incluso... bah, podemos permitirnos estos pequeños lujos, si a ellos les parece bien; pero lo otro, lo único importante, eso jamás, ¿no lo ves tú así?

Mistress Munt no lo veía así y, a decir verdad, Margaret sostenía una tesis sumamente discutible, a saber, que una emoción, un interés cualquiera, una vez engendrados, pueden morir por completo.

—Además, tengo el honor de informarte de que los Wilcox están hartos de nosotras. No te lo dije en su momento, porque te habría molestado y ya tenías bastantes preocupaciones encima, pero escribí una carta a mistres Wilcox pidiéndole disculpas por los contratiempos que Helen les había causado y no me contestó.

—¡Qué grosería!

—¿Grosería o delicadeza?

—Grosería, Margaret, y de las más gordas.

—En cualquier caso, yo lo consideraría tranquilizador.

Mistress Munt suspiró. Volvía a Swanage a la mañana siguiente, en el preciso momento en que más la necesitaban sus sobrinas. Otros pesares la embargaban: por ejemplo, el desaire que le habría hecho a Charles si se lo hubiera encontrado cara a cara. Ya lo había visto, dando una orden al portero, y le había parecido muy vulgar, con su sombrero de copa. Pero, por desgracia, Charles miraba en dirección contraria a la suya y, aunque ella le había vuelto

ostensiblemente la espalda, no podía considerar aquello como un desaire.

—Tendrás cuidado, ¿eh? —aconsejó.

—Dese luego. Seré diabólicamente cuidadosa.

—Helen también tiene que tener cuidado.

—¿De qué? —gritó Helen, que entraba en aquel momento en la estancia con su prima.

—De nada —dijo Margaret, llevada de una momentánea torpeza.

—¿De qué tengo que tener cuidado, tía Juley?

Mistress Munt asumió un aire críptico.

—Se trata de que cierta familia, cuyo nombre sabemos, pero no mencionamos, como tú misma dijiste ayer noche después del concierto, ha tomado el apartamento de enfrente de los Matheson; aquél, el de las plantas en el balcón.

Helen inició una respuesta chistosa y de pronto, con gran desconcierto de todos, enrojeció. Mistress Munt se quedó tan perpleja que exclamó: «Helen, no te importa, ¿verdad?», con lo que consiguió que el rojo se volviera carmesí.

—Por supuesto que no —dijo Helen un poco cortante—. Es que tanto Meg como tú os habéis puesto tan absurdamente serias sin motivo...

—Yo no estoy seria —protestó Margaret, un poco arisca a su vez.

—Pues lo pareces, ¿verdad, Frieda?

—No estoy seria, es todo lo que te puedo decir; vas por mal camino si piensas...

—No está seria —repitió mistress Munt como un eco—, yo lo puedo atestiguar. Simplemente, no cree que...

—¡Atención! —interrumpió fräulein Mosebach—. Oigo a Bruno que entra en el vestíbulo.

Herr Liesecke tenía que ir a Wickham Place a buscar a las dos jóvenes. No estaba entrando —en realidad, no entró hasta cinco minutos más tarde—, pero Frieda, que había detectado una

situación delicada, dijo que sería mejor que Helen y ella esperaran a Bruno abajo y dejaran a Margaret y a mistress Munt acabar de arreglar las flores. Helen asintió, pero, para demostrar que la situación no era delicada, se detuvo en la puerta y dijo:

—¿Dijiste el piso de los Matheson, tía Juley? ¡Eres maravillosa! No sabía que la señora del traje ceñido se llamaba Matheson.

—Vamos, Helen —dijo su prima.

—Sí, Helen, vete ya —dijo su tía, y, dirigiéndose a Margaret acto seguido—: Helen no me engaña: está preocupada.

—¡Calla! —susurró Margaret—. Frieda te va a oír y se pondrá pesadísima.

—Está preocupada —insistió mistress Munt paseando pensativa por la habitación y retirando los crisantemos muertos de sus jarrones—. Sabía que le preocuparía. Es lo lógico. ¡Qué experiencia! ¡Qué gente más ordinaria! Yo los conozco mejor que tú, no lo olvides. Si Charles te hubiera llevado en su auto, ¡vaya!, habrías llegado a la casa hecha un trapo. Ay, Margaret, tú no te das cuenta de lo que se viene encima. ¿No lo ves? Si están ahí, agolpados contra la ventana del salón. Mira, acabo de ver a mistress Wilcox, estoy segura, y a Paul, y a Evie, que es una desvergonzada. Y ahí está Charles; a ése es al primero que vi. ¿Y ese hombre mayor, con bigote y la cara cobriza, quién será?

—Seguramente míster Wilcox.

—Ah, lo sabía. Ahí está míster Wilcox.

—No es correcto decir que tiene la cara cobriza —protestó Margaret—. Tiene un cutis muy decente, para su edad.

Mistress Munt, que ya había triunfado, no tuvo inconveniente en conceder a míster Wilcox un cutis aceptable. De eso pasó a la estrategia que sus sobrinas debían seguir en el futuro. Margaret intentó pararle los pies.

—Helen no tomó la noticia como yo esperaba, es cierto, pero el nervio Wilcox está muerto, de modo que no hacen falta planes.

—No, no pienso estarlo.

—¿Por qué?

—Porque...

Su pensamiento, salido de oscuros confines, se detuvo. No podía expresarlo con palabras, pero sentía que quienes se preparan de antemano para todas las emergencias de la vida lo hacen a costa de la alegría. Hay que prepararse para un examen, para una cena o para una posible baja en las cotizaciones de bolsa; pero cuando uno se ve involucrado en las relaciones humanas, ha de adoptar otro método si no quiere fracasar.

—Prefiero los riesgos —fue su coja conclusión.

—Imagínate las noches —exclamó su tía señalando hacia las Mansions con el caño de la regadera—. Enciendes la luz aquí o allá y es como si fuera la misma habitación. Una noche se olvidan de cerrar los postigos y los veis; a la noche siguiente, os olvidáis vosotras y os ven. Ya no podréis sentaros en el balcón. Ya no podréis regar las plantas; ni hablar, siquiera. Imagínate que sales a la calle y en el mismo momento salen ellos. Oh, querida, y aún dices que los planes son innecesarios y que prefieres el riesgo.

—Espero arriesgarme toda la vida.

—Ay, Margaret, que es muy peligroso.

—Sí, tía Juley, pero, en el fondo —continuó Margaret con una sonrisa—, el riesgo nunca es mucho cuando se tiene dinero.

—¡Santo Dios! ¡Qué idea más chocante!

—El dinero suaviza las aristas —dijo miss Schlegel—. Dios proteja a quienes no lo tienen.

—¡Vaya! Esto es nuevo —dijo mistress Munt, que almacenaba ideas nuevas como las ardillas almacenan nueces y se sentía particularmente atraída por las ideas de quita y pon.

—Hay que estar preparadas.

—Nuevo para mí; las personas sensatas lo han sabido siempre. Tanto tú, como yo, como los Wilcox, vivimos sobre el dinero como sobre una isla. Está tan segura bajo nuestros pies que olvidamos su misma existencia. Sólo cuando vemos tambalearse a alguien junto a nosotros nos damos cuenta de lo que significa una renta. Ayer noche, mientras hablábamos aquí, junto al fuego, yo empecé a pensar que el alma del mundo es la economía, y que el abismo más profundo no es la falta de amor, sino la falta de dinero.

—A esto le llamo yo cinismo.

—Yo también. Pero Helen y yo deberíamos recordar, cuando sentimos la tentación de criticar a los demás, que ambas vivimos sobre esas islas, y que la mayor parte de las personas viven bajo la superficie de las aguas. Los pobres no siempre pueden alcanzar a las personas que aman y difícilmente pueden huir de aquellos a quienes ya no aman. Nosotros, los ricos, sí que podemos. Imagínate la tragedia del pasado junio si Helen y Paul Wilcox hubieran sido pobres y no hubieran podido utilizar trenes y automóviles para separarse.

—Esto me suena a socialismo —dijo mistress Munt, suspicaz.

—Llámalo como quieras. Yo lo llamo ir por la vida con las cartas boca arriba. Estoy harta de los ricos que simulan ser pobres y juzgan elegante ignorar los pilares de oro que mantienen sus pies sobre las olas. Yo me sostengo sobre seiscientas libras anuales y Helen, igual, y Tibby, en su día, se sostendrá sobre ochocientas. Tan pronto nuestras libras se las traga el mar, surgen otras. Del mar, sí, del mar. Y todas nuestras ideas son las ideas de los que tienen seiscientas libras; y todo lo que decimos, también; y como no queremos robar paraguas, olvidamos que los que viven bajo el mar sí quieren robarlos, y a veces lo hacen, y que lo que aquí es un juego, abajo es una realidad.

—Ahí va... ahí va fräulein Mosebach. La verdad es que, para ser alemana, viste muy bien. ¡Oh!

—¿Qué pasa?

—¡Helen ha mirado hacia el piso de los Wilcox!

—¿Y por qué no?

—Perdona, te he interrumpido. ¿Qué decías de la realidad?

—Hablaba conmigo misma, como de costumbre —respondió Margaret en tono preocupado.

—En cualquier caso, dime una cosa, ¿estás a favor de los ricos o de los pobres?

—Es difícil de contestar. Pregúntamelo de otra manera. ¿Estoy a favor de la riqueza o de la pobreza? De la riqueza. ¡Viva la riqueza!

—¡Viva! —repitió mistress Munt, que al fin se había asegurado su nuez.

—Sí, la riqueza. ¡Dinero para siempre!

—Eso mismo pienso yo y así piensan, según me temo, todos mis conocidos de Swanage, pero me sorprende que tú estés de acuerdo con nosotros.

—Gracias, tía Juley. Mientras yo teorizaba tú has arreglado las flores.

—De nada, querida. Me gustaría poder ayudarte en cosas más importantes.

—Bueno, ¿quieres hacerme un favor? ¿Quieres acompañarme a la agencia? Hay una criada que no se decide a decir que sí, pero tampoco dice que no.

De camino a la agencia miraron hacia el piso de los Wilcox. Evie estaba en la terraza, «observando groseramente», en opinión de mistress Munt. Desde luego, resultaba incómodo. Helen podía resistir un encuentro fortuito, pero... Margaret empezó a perder la confianza. ¿No reviviría el nervio si la familia en cuestión vivía en sus propias narices? Frieda Mosebach pensaba quedarse con ellas un par de semanas más y Frieda era aguda, abominablemente aguda, capaz de decir: «Amas al joven que vive ahí enfrente, ¿verdad?», lo cual era falso, pero acabaría por ser cierto a fuerza de insistencia, al igual que el comentario «Inglaterra y Alemania acabarán luchando» implica un paso hacia la guerra cada vez que se formula, y así es como la prensa sensacionalista de ambas naciones contribuye paulatinamente a fomentar el conflicto. ¿Tendrán también las emociones particulares su prensa sensacionalista? Margaret así lo creía y temía que la buena de la tía Juley y Frieda fueran dos típicos especímenes. Con su charla incesante podían inducir a Helen a una repetición de los deseos de junio. A una repetición; más, no. Nunca podrían inducirle a un amor duradero. Eran —Margaret lo veía con claridad— puro Periodismo. Su padre, con sus defectos y su desorientación, era auténtica Literatura y, de haber vivido, habría sabido persuadir a Helen.

La agencia estaba en plena ebullición. Una fila de carruajes llenaba la calle. Miss Schlegel esperó turno y, al final, tuvo que contentarse con una insidiosa «interina», pues las genuinas criadas

habían rechazado su demanda a causa de las numerosas escaleras de la casa. Este fracaso le deprimió y, aunque acabó por olvidar el fracaso, continuó deprimida. En el camino de vuelta volvió a otear el piso de los Wilcox y dio el paso maternal de hablar del asunto con Helen.

—Helen, dime si este asunto te preocupa.

—¿Si qué? —dijo Helen que se estaba lavando las manos para bajar a comer.

—Ya sabes, la llegada de los Wilcox.

—No, de ningún modo.

—¿De veras?

—De veras.

Luego admitió que estaba un poco preocupada por mistress Wilcox. Según ella, mistress Wilcox era una mujer capaz de albergar sentimientos muy hondos y de dolerse de cosas que no afectaban a los restantes miembros del clan.

—Si Paul señala nuestra casa y dice: «Ahí vive la chica que trató de pescarme», no me importará. Pero sí me importaría que lo dijera ella.

—Si eso te preocupa, podemos hacer algo. No hay motivo para que estemos cerca de gente que nos desagrada o a la que desagradamos. Para eso nos sirve el dinero. Podemos irnos fuera una temporada.

—Yo me voy. Frieda me ha invitado a ir a Stettin y no regresaré hasta después de Año Nuevo. ¿Será suficiente o tengo que abandonar el país para siempre? Vamos, Meg, ¿qué te pasa?, *¿a* qué tanto enredo?

—Supongo que me estoy volviendo una solterona. Creí que todo me traía sin cuidado, pero... me disgustaría que te enamorases del mismo hombre dos veces y como... —se aclaró la garganta— ...como enrojeciste cuando la tía Juley te dijo aquello esta mañana... Tal vez no debí haber mencionado este asunto.

Pero la risa de Helen parecía sincera y, levantando al cielo una mano enjabonada, juró que nunca, en ningún lugar y bajo ninguna

circunstancia se enamoraría de ningún Wilcox, incluyendo los más lejanos parientes colaterales.

CAPÍTULO VIII

Tal vez la amistad entre Margaret y mistress Wilcox, que había de desarrollarse con tanta rapidez y tan extraños resultados, tuvo su origen en Spira, la primavera anterior. Tal vez mistress Wilcox, mientras contemplaba la roja e insípida catedral y oía la conversación de Helen con su marido, percibió en la otra hermana, menos agraciada, una sensibilidad más profunda y un juicio más sereno. Mistress Wilcox podía detectar estas cosas. Tal vez fue ella la que quiso invitar a miss Schlegel a Howards End y la que deseaba la presencia de Margaret en particular. Pero todo esto son especulaciones. Mistress Wilcox ha dejado tras de sí indicios poco claros. Lo único cierto es que llamó a Wickham Place dos semanas más tarde, el mismo día en que Helen se iba con su prima a Stettin. —¡Helen! —gritó fräulein Mosebach con sorpresa (estaba por entonces al corriente de las confidencias de su prima)—. ¡Su madre te ha perdonado! —y luego, recordando que en Inglaterra el recién llegado no debe invitar hasta ser invitado, pasó de la sorpresa a la desaprobación y opinó que mistress Wilcox era *keine Dame.*

—¡Al cuerno toda la familia! —atajó Margaret—. Helen, deja de reír y de zascandilear y acaba de hacer el equipaje. ¿Por qué no nos dejará en paz esa mujer?

—No sé qué vamos a hacer con Meg —replicó Helen parándose en las escaleras—. Se le han metido los Wilcox en la cabeza. Meg, Meg, no estoy enamorada de ese chico, no estoy enamorada de ese chico. ¿Qué más te puedo decir?

—Es verdad, su amor ha muerto —corroboró fräulein Mosebach.

—De acuerdo, Frieda, pero esto no me impedirá preocuparme por los Wilcox si acepto su invitación.

Helen hizo ver que lloraba y fräulein Mosebach, que la encontraba muy graciosa, la imitó.

—Buaah, buaah. Meg aceptará la invitación y yo no. ¿Por qué? Porque me voy a Alemania, aaah.

—Si te vas a Alemania, ve a hacer las maletas; si no, ve y llama a los Wilcox en mi lugar.

—Meg, Meg, no estoy enamorada de ese chico; no estoy enamorada... Ay, Dios mío, ¿quién baja? Juraría que es mi hermano. ¡Voto a tal!

La presencia de un varón —incluso de un varón como Tibby— bastó para poner fin al alboroto. La barrera de los sexos, aunque en decadencia entre las personas civilizadas, todavía es alta, y más alta aún del lado de las mujeres. Helen podía contárselo todo a su hermana, y casi todo a su prima, sobre Paul, pero no le contó nada a su hermano. No era pudor, pues hablaba del «ideal de los Wilcox» con hilaridad e incluso con una creciente brutalidad. No se trataba tampoco de precaución, porque Tibby nunca repetía nada que no le concerniera a él. Era más bien la sensación de que traicionaba un secreto al pasarlo al terreno de los hombres y que aquél, por trivial que fuera a este lado de la barrera, se volvería importante al otro. Así que se calló o, mejor, empezó a desvariar sobre otros asuntos hasta que sus familiares, agotados, la llevaron al piso de arriba. Fräulein Mosebach la siguió, pero se detuvo para decir desde la barandilla a Margaret:

—Todo va bien; ya no ama a ese joven. Él no la merecía.

—Ya lo sé, gracias.

—Creí que debía decírtelo.

—Gracias.

—¿De qué se trata? —preguntó Tibby. Nadie le contestó y se metió en el comedor a comerse los pasteles.

Aquella noche Margaret pasó a la acción. La casa estaba silenciosa y la niebla —estamos en noviembre— se agolpaba contra las ventanas como un fantasma exiliado. Frieda, Helen y sus respectivos equipajes se habían ido. Tibby, que no se encontraba bien, yacía tendido en un sofá, junto al fuego. Margaret se sentó a su lado, pensativa. Su mente saltaba de impulso en impulso y,

finalmente, los puso en orden. Las personas con sentido práctico que saben de inmediato lo que quieren y, por lo general, no saben nada más, se servirán excusar su indecisión. Pero ésta era su forma de pensar. Y cuando actuaba, nadie podía acusarle de indecisión. Actuaba con tanta violencia como si no hubiese parado mientes en el asunto. La carta que escribió a mistress Wilcox brillaba con «los primitivos matices de la resolución» [4]. En Margaret «los pálidos toques del pensamiento» [5] era un aliento más que un barniz, un aliento que aviva los colores cuando ha pasado.

Querida mistress Wilcox:

Me veo en la obligación de ser descortés con usted. Será mejor que no nos veamos. Tanto mi hermana como mi tía han dado a su familia motivos de desagrado y, en el caso de mi hermana, los motivos de desagrado podrían reproducirse. Me consta que ella ya no piensa en su hijo de usted. Pero no sería conveniente, ni para ella ni para usted, que ambos se vieran de nuevo y creo, por tanto, preferible que nuestra amistad, que empezó bajo tan buenos auspicios, acabe.

Temo que no estará usted de acuerdo conmigo; estoy firmemente convencida de ello toda vez que ha sido usted tan amable de invitarnos. Por mi parte, se trata sólo de una intuición y no dudo de que la intuición es muchas veces errónea. Mi hermana opinará sin duda que lo es en este caso. Le escribo sin que ella lo sepa y confío en que no la asocie a mi descortesía.

Afectuosamente,

M. J. SCHLEGEL

Margaret envió la carta por correo inmediatamente. A la mañana siguiente recibió la respuesta en mano.

Querida miss Schlegel:

No debía haberme escrito esa carta. La llamé para decirle que Paul se ha ido al extranjero.

Ruth Wilcox

Las mejillas de Margaret ardían. No pudo terminar el desayuno. Hervía de vergüenza. Helen le había dicho que Paul se iba de Inglaterra, pero otros detalles le habían parecido más importantes y lo había olvidado. Todas sus absurdas preocupaciones se desmoronaron y en su lugar se alzó la certeza de que se había comportado groseramente con mistress Wilcox. La grosería afectaba a Margaret como un sabor amargo. La consideraba un veneno en la vida. A veces era necesaria, pero ¡ay de aquellos que la emplean sin necesidad! Se puso un sombrero y un chal, como una pedigüeña, y se adentró en la niebla que aún persistía. Tenía los labios comprimidos y estrujaba la carta en la mano. Así cruzó la calle, entró en el vestíbulo de mármol, eludió a los porteros y corrió escaleras arriba hasta el segundo piso.

Dio su nombre y, con gran sorpresa por su parte, fue conducida directamente al dormitorio de mistress Wilcox.

—Oh, mistress Wilcox, he cometido la peor de las torpezas. Estoy más avergonzada de lo que puedo expresar.

Mistress Wilcox se inclinó gravemente. Estaba ofendida y no pretendía disimularlo. Incorporada en la cama, escribía cartas en una mesita de enfermo extendida sobre sus rodillas. La bandeja del desayuno descansaba en otra mesa, junto a la cama. La luz del fuego, la luz de la ventana y la luz del candelabro que arrojaba un halo tembloroso en torno a sus manos se combinaban para crear una extraña atmósfera de desintegración.

—Sabía que se iba a la India en noviembre, pero lo olvidé.

—Se fue el día diecisiete a Nigeria, África.

—Lo sé, lo sé. Mi comportamiento ha sido absurdo. Estoy sumamente avergonzada.

Mistress Wilcox no respondió.

—Lo siento más de lo que puedo expresar y espero que sabrá usted perdonarme.

—No tiene importancia, miss Schlegel. Ha sido un buen detalle por su parte haber venido tan pronto.

—¡Ya lo creo que tiene importancia! —exclamó Margaret—. He sido grosera con usted. Mi hermana no está en casa, ni siquiera tengo esta excusa.

—Ah, ¿sí?

—Se fue a Alemania.

—Así que también se fue —murmuró mistress Wilcox—. Sí, es cierto, estamos a salvo... completamente a salvo...

—¡Usted también estaba preocupada! —dijo Margaret cada vez más excitada, tomando una silla sin haber sido invitada a sentarse —. ¡Qué cosa más extraordinaria! Ahora veo que usted también estaba inquieta. Opina usted igual que yo, ¿verdad? Helen no debe verle más.

—Creo que es lo mejor.

—Sí, pero ¿por qué?

—Ésta es una pregunta difícil —dijo mistress Wilcox sonriendo y perdiendo parte de su aire adusto—. Creo que lo expresó usted mejor en su carta: es una intuición que puede ser errónea.

—No será que su hijo aún...

—Oh, no. Paul, cada dos por tres... mi Paul es muy joven, ¿sabe?

—¿Entonces?

—Una intuición que puede ser errónea —repitió mistress Wilcox.

—En otras palabras, que pertenecen a esa clase de personas que pueden enamorarse, pero no pueden vivir juntas. Es muy probable. Temo que en nueve de cada diez casos la Naturaleza tire para un lado y la voluntad humana para el otro.

—Esto ya son «otras palabras» —dijo mistress Wilcox—. Yo no estaba pensando en algo tan profundo. Simplemente, me alarmé cuando supe que mi hijo había puesto los ojos en su hermana.

—Siempre quise preguntarle una cosa: ¿cómo lo supo? Helen se sorprendió mucho cuando zanjó usted los problemas suscitados por la aparición de nuestra tía. ¿Se lo dijo Paul?

—No ganamos nada discutiendo este punto —dijo mistress Wilcox tras una pausa.

—Mistress Wilcox, ¿se enfadó usted con nosotras en junio? Yo le escribí una carta y usted no me contestó.

—Desde luego, me opuse a que tomásemos el apartamento de mistress Matheson. Sabía que estaba enfrente del de ustedes.

—Pero ahora ya no le importa.

—Creo que no.

—¿Sólo lo cree? ¿No está segura? Me desconcierta esta reserva, mistress Wilcox.

—No, no. Estoy segura —dijo mistress Wilcox revolviéndose con dificultad entre las sábanas—. Siempre parezco dubitativa, pero es mi forma de hablar.

—Me alegro. Yo también estoy segura.

Entró la doncella a llevarse la bandeja del desayuno. Se interrumpieron y, al reanudar la conversación, ésta se deslizó por cauces más normales.

—He de irme, usted querrá levantarse.

—No, por favor, quédese un rato más. Me quedo todo el día en la cama. Lo hago de vez en cuando.

—Creí que era usted una persona madrugadora.

—En Howards End, sí. Pero en Londres no hay nada que lo justifique.

—¿Cómo, nada? —gritó Margaret escandalizada—. ¡Si están las exposiciones de otoño, e Ysaye, que toca esta noche! ¡Y eso sin hablar de la gente!

—La verdad es que estoy un poco cansada. Primero vino la boda, luego se fue Paul y ayer, en lugar de descansar, estuve haciendo visitas.

—¿Una boda?

—Sí. Charles, mi hijo mayor, se ha casado.

—¡De veras!

—Tomamos este piso por ese motivo, principalmente; y también para que Paul pudiese pertrecharse antes de partir para África. El piso pertenece a un primo de mi marido, que tuvo la gentileza de

ofrecérnoslo. Así que tuvimos ocasión de conocer a los parientes de Dolly que aún no conocíamos.

Margaret preguntó quiénes eran los parientes de Dolly.

—Los Fussell. El padre es oficial del ejército en la India, retirado; el hermano está en el ejército. La madre murió.

Margaret pensó que quizá esos eran «los hombres morenos y sin barbilla» que Helen había espiado una noche a través de las ventanas. Margaret se sentía ligeramente interesada en la fortuna de la familia Wilcox. Había adquirido aquella costumbre a causa de Helen y todavía la conservaba. Siguió preguntando por miss Dolly Fussell y obtuvo una información neutra dicha en un tono neutro. La voz de mistress Wilcox, si bien dulce y persuasiva, carecía de expresión. Parecía indicar que los cuadros, los conciertos y las personas tenían un valor similar y escaso. Sólo una vez se animó su voz: cuando hablaron de Howards End.

—Charles y Albert Fussell se conocen desde hace tiempo. Pertenecen al mismo club y ambos adoran el golf. Dolly también juega, aunque supongo que no tan bien como ellos. Se conocieron en un partido a cuatro. Dolly es un encanto; todos la queremos mucho. Se casaron el día once, poco antes de que Paul embarcase. Charles quería a toda costa que su hermano fuera testigo de la boda, así que se empeñó en casarse el día once. Los Fussell querían retrasarlo hasta después de Navidad, pero al final condescendieron amablemente. Allí hay una fotografía de Dolly, en aquel marco doble.

—¿Está segura de que no le interrumpo, mistress Wilcox?

—Desde luego que no.

—En tal caso, me quedo. Me gusta estar con usted.

Examinaron la fotografía de Dolly. Estaba firmada: «Para la querida Mims», que, según explicó mistress Wilcox, era «el nombre que Charles y ella han escogido para llamarme a mí». Dolly parecía tonta y tenía una de esas caras triangulares que suelen resultar atractivas a los hombres robustos. Era muy linda. De ella, Margaret pasó a Charles, cuyos rasgos destacaba en la otra cara del díptico. Especuló sobre las fuerzas que habían unido a aquellas dos personas

hasta que Dios los separase y aún le quedó tiempo para desearles que fueran felices.

—Han ido a Nápoles a pasar la luna de miel.

—¡Dichosos ellos!

—No me imagino a Charles en Italia.

—¿No le gusta viajar?

—Sí, le gusta, pero no soporta a los extranjeros. Lo que más le divierte es viajar en automóvil por Inglaterra y creo que habrían hecho eso de no hacer un tiempo tan desapacible. Su padre le dio uno de sus coches como regalo de boda. Ahora está guardado en Howards End.

—Supongo que tendrán allí un garaje.

—Sí. Mi marido construyó uno pequeño el mes pasado, al lado este de la casa, cerca del olmo, donde antes estaba el establo del poney.

Estas últimas palabras tenían una indescriptible vibración.

—¿Y qué han hecho con el poney? —preguntó Margaret tras una pausa.

—¿El poney? Murió hace mucho tiempo.

—Recuerdo el olmo. Helen me habló de él; dijo que era un árbol espléndido.

—Es el mejor olmo de Hertfordshire. ¿Le dijo algo su hermana de los dientes?

—No.

—Tal vez le interese. Hay unos dientes de cerdo clavados en el árbol, a un metro del suelo. Los campesinos los pusieron hace mucho. Existe la creencia de que chupando la corteza se cura el dolor de muelas. Los dientes casi han desaparecido y ya nadie viene a chupar el árbol.

—Yo lo haría. Me encantan las tradiciones y las supersticiones.

—¿Le parece que un árbol puede curar el dolor de muelas si alguien tiene fe?

—Por supuesto que sí. Ese árbol lo curaba todo... antiguamente.

—Es cierto, yo sé de algunos casos... Yo vivía en Howards End mucho antes de conocer a míster Wilcox. Nací allí.

La conversación derivó de nuevo hacia otros derroteros. A veces daba la impresión de ser una charla sin sentido. Margaret se sintió interesada cuando su anfitriona le contó que Howards End era de su propiedad y se aburrió con la descripción detallada de la familia Fussell, con las preocupaciones de Charles respecto a Nápoles, con los movimientos de míster Wilcox y Evie que a la sazón recorrían Yorkshire en automóvil. Margaret no soportaba el aburrimiento. Dejó de prestar atención, jugueteó con el marco de las fotografías, lo dejó caer, rompió el cristal que cubría el retrato de Dolly, se disculpó, fue perdonada, se cortó un dedo, fue compadecida y, por fin, tuvo que irse: había que hacer las faenas de la casa y tenía que entrevistarse con el profesor de equitación de Tibby.

Entonces volvió a vibrar la nota sorprendente.

—Adiós, miss Schlegel. Adiós y gracias por su visita. Me ha alegrado usted mucho con su compañía.

—¡Yo sí que estoy contenta!

—Me pregunto... me pregunto si piensa usted alguna vez en sí misma.

—No pienso en otra cosa —dijo Margaret enrojeciendo, pero dejando posar una mano sobre la de la enferma.

—Lo dudo. Empecé a dudarlo ya en Heidelberg.

—Oh, desde luego que sí, mistress Wilcox.

—Más bien me inclino a pensar...

—¿Sí? —preguntó Margaret viendo que la pausa se prolongaba; una pausa parecida al titilar del fuego, al temblor del candelabro en las manos, al blanco borroso de la ventana; una pausa de sombra eterna y movediza.

—Más bien me inclino a pensar que olvida usted que es una chica.

Margaret se sorprendió y se enojó ligeramente.

—Tengo veintinueve años —observó—. Ya no soy una niña.

Mistress Wilcox sonrió.

—¿Por qué me habla así? ¿Quiere decir que he sido inoportuna y grosera?

Margaret hizo un gesto negativo con la cabeza.

—Sólo quise decir que yo tengo cincuenta y uno y que, para mí, las dos... No sé, léalo en un libro. Yo no sé explicarme con claridad.

—Ya lo entiendo: la inexperiencia. No soy mejor que Helen, quiere usted decir y, sin embargo, tengo la pretensión de cuidar de ella.

—Sí, lo ha entendido usted. Inexperiencia es la palabra.

—La inexperiencia —repitió Margaret en tono serio, pero altisonante—. Desde luego, me falta mucho por aprender... todo absolutamente, igual que a Helen. La vida es difícil, está llena de sorpresas. Eso es todo lo que sé. Hay que ser humilde y bondadoso, seguir el recto camino, amar al prójimo en lugar de compadecerle, acordarse de los inferiores... bueno, no se puede hacer todo eso al mismo tiempo, ¿qué le vamos a hacer? Una cosa se contradice con la otra. Y ahí es donde interviene la proporción... vivir con sentido de la proporción, ¿eh? No, no empiece con la proporción, es de pedantes decir eso. Guardemos la proporción como último recurso, cuando las cosas mejores hayan fallado y el punto muerto... Oh, tonta de mí, me he puesto a discursear.

—La verdad es que explica usted las dificultades de la vida espléndidamente —dijo mistress Wilcox retirando su mano hacia las sombras—. Es lo que yo habría querido decir.

CAPÍTULO IX

No puede decirse que mistress Wilcox hubiese dado a Margaret mucha información sobre la vida. Margaret, por su parte, había mostrado mucha humildad al admitir una inexperiencia que en su fuero interno no reconocía. Se había hecho cargo de la casa durante diez años y había llevado a cabo sus obligaciones con gran distinción, había educado a una hermana encantadora y estaba educando a un hermano. Ciertamente, si la experiencia se puede adquirir, Margaret la había adquirido.

No obstante, la pequeña recepción que dio en honor de mistress Wilcox no resultó un éxito. Su nueva amiga no logró encajar entre las «dos o tres personas encantadoras» que Margaret invitó para presentárselas y la atmósfera reinante fue de un cortés desconcierto. Los gustos de la invitada eran simples; sus conocimientos culturales, escasos; no le interesaban ni el Nuevo Club de Arte Inglés ni la línea divisoria entre el Periodismo y la Literatura, tema que se suscitó para provocar la conversación, como se lanza una liebre mecánica. Las personas encantadoras se arrojaron tras él con gritos de júbilo, encabezados por Margaret y hasta que la comida no estuvo mediada no se dieron cuenta de que la invitada de honor no había tomado parte en la cacería. No tenían ningún tema en común. Mistress Wilcox, que había consagrado su vida al cuidado de su marido y sus hijos, tenía muy poco que decir a unos extraños que jamás habían hecho algo parecido y a los que doblaba en edad. La conversación inteligente le asustaba y difuminaba su delicada imagen; los interlocutores eran como un automóvil, todo traqueteo; ella, en cambio, era una brizna de trigo, una flor. Por dos veces se lamentó del mal tiempo, por dos veces criticó el servicio de trenes de la Great Northern Railway. Todos

asintieron con vehemencia y continuaron con lo suyo. Cuando preguntó si había noticias de Helen, su anfitriona, demasiado ocupada en poner en su sitio a Rothenstein, no le respondió. Repitió la pregunta: «Espero que su hermana se encuentre bien en Alemania.» Margaret contuvo su ardor polémico y dijo: «Sí, gracias; tuve noticias de ella el martes.» Pero el diablo de la vociferación la poseía y al cabo de un momento se había descontrolado otra vez.

—Sólo los martes, porque viven lejos, en Stettin. ¿Oyó usted hablar alguna vez a alguien que viviera en Stettin?

—Jamás —dijo mistress Wilcox mientras su vecino, un joven perteneciente a la Oficina de Educación, empezaba a discutir cómo debía de ser la gente que vivía en Stettin. ¿Existiría algo así como la stettinitis? Margaret no le hizo caso y prosiguió:

—La gente de Stettin tira cosas a los barcos desde unos almacenes colgantes. Al menos, eso hacen nuestros primos, pero no son particularmente ricos. La ciudad carece de interés, salvo un reloj que mueve los ojos y la vista del Oder, que es realmente algo excepcional. ¡Oh, mistress Wilcox, a usted le encantaría el Oder!

El río, o mejor los ríos, porque parece que haya docenas de ellos, son de un azul intenso y la llanura por la que discurren es de un verde aún más intenso.

—¡Vaya! Debe de ser una vista de lo más hermoso, miss Schlegel.

—Ésa es mi opinión, pero Helen, que todo lo embrolla, dice que no, que es como la música. El curso del Oder tiene que ser como la música, ha de recordarle un poema sinfónico. La parte que discurre junto a los embarcaderos es en sí menor, si mal no recuerdo, pero en el llano, las cosas se complican sobremanera. Hay un tema oscuro y politónico, que representa los bancos de cieno y otro para el canal navegable; la desembocadura es el Báltico es en do sostenido mayor, pianísimo.

—¿Y qué pintan en esto los almacenes colgantes? —preguntó un joven riendo.

—Mucho —replicó Margaret lanzándose inesperadamente por un nuevo camino—. Considero afectado comparar el Oder con la música, al igual que usted, pero los almacenes colgantes de Stettin

reflejan una verdadera preocupación por la belleza, una preocupación que nosotros no sentimos, que el inglés medio no siente; más aún, el inglés medio desprecia al que la siente. Y ahora no me diga usted: «Los alemanes no tienen gusto», porque chillaré. No lo tienen, de acuerdo, pero... pero, y es un tremendo «pero», se toman en serio la poesía. Realmente, se toman en serio la poesía.

—¿Y qué ganan con esto?

—Sí, sí, los alemanes están siempre pendientes de la belleza. Pueden echarla a perder por estupidez, o malinterpretarla, pero siempre están pidiendo que la belleza entre en sus vidas, y yo creo que al final lo conseguirán. Conocí en Heidelberg a un veterinario gordo cuya voz se cortaba en sollozos cada vez que recitaba unos poemas horrorosos. Habría sido fácil para mí reírme de él, para mí, que jamás recito poemas, buenos o malos y que no puedo recordar ni un fragmento de verso con el que emocionarme un poco a mí misma. Me hierve la sangre, bien, soy medio alemana, así que atribúyanlo si quieren al patriotismo, cada vez que oigo al inglés medio despreciar las cosas alemanas por mor del buen gusto, tanto si se refiere a Bocklin como a mi veterinario. «Ah, Bocklin —dicen— corre como un loco detrás de la belleza, puebla la Naturaleza de dioses demasiado conscientemente.» Por supuesto, Bocklin fuerza las cosas, porque quiere algo: la belleza y todos los demás bienes intangibles que flotan en este mundo. Por eso sus paisajes no arrebatan y los de Leader sí.

—No estoy del todo conforme —dijo el joven—. ¿Y usted, mistress Wilcox?

Mistress Wilcox replicó:

—Creo que miss Schlegel se expresa muy requetebién.

Un silencio helado cayó sobre la reunión.

—Por favor, mistress Wilcox, diga algo más halagador. Es un desaire decir que alguien se expresa muy requetebién.

—No fue mi intención desairarla. Lo que dijo me interesó mucho. Por lo general, a la gente no parece gustarle Alemania. Siempre quise oír lo que decían los del otro lado.

—¿Los del otro lado? Entonces no está usted de acuerdo. ¡Qué bien! Denos su versión.

—Yo no tengo versión ni estoy de ningún lado. Pero mi marido —su voz se atenuó y el hielo se hizo más espeso— tiene muy poca fe en el continente, y nuestros hijos han salido a su padre.

—¿Por qué razón? ¿Cree que el continente está en decadencia?

Mistress Wilcox no tenía la menor idea; prestaba poca atención a las razones. No era una intelectual, ni siquiera era una persona despierta y resultaba extraño que, a pesar de todo, diese aquella sensación de grandeza. Margaret, sin dejar de zigzaguear con sus amigos del Pensamiento al Arte, era consciente de la presencia de una personalidad que trascendía la de ellos y empequeñecía sus actividades. No había amargura en mistress Wilcox, ni siquiera crítica; era adorable y no había salido de sus labios una palabra torpe o acerba. Con todo, o ella o la vida cotidiana estaban fuera de lugar; ambas eran incompatibles y una u otra tenían que difuminarse en un segundo plano. En aquella comida, ella parecía más fuera de lugar que de costumbre y más próxima a la línea que separa la vida cotidiana de otra vida, quizá más importante.

—Admitirá usted, sin embargo, que el continente... bueno, parecerá ridículo hablar del continente, pero en realidad es más semejante entre sí que cualquiera de sus partes a Inglaterra. Inglaterra es única. Tome un poco más de gelatina. Iba a decir que el continente, para bien o para mal, siente un profundo interés por las ideas. Su Literatura y su Arte tienen lo que podría llamarse «la chaladura de lo invisible», que persiste a pesar de la decadencia o la afectación. Hay más libertad de acción en Inglaterra, pero si quiere usted libertad de pensamiento, vaya a la burocrática Prusia. Allí la gente discute con humildad cuestiones vitales que aquí juzgamos demasiado elevadas para tocarlas ni siquiera con pinzas.

—Yo no quiero ir a Prusia —dijo mistress Wilcox—, ni siquiera para contemplar esa vista tan bonita que usted describió. Y ya soy demasiado vieja para discutir con humildad. Nunca discutimos en Howards End.

—¡Deberían hacerlo! —dijo Margaret—. La discusión mantiene viva la casa. Una casa no puede mantenerse sólo de ladrillos y cemento.

—Tampoco sin ellos —dijo mistress Wilcox recogiendo el hilo inesperadamente y levantando por primera y última vez una débil

esperanza en el círculo de personas encantadoras—. No puede mantenerse sin ellos y a veces pienso que... Pero no puedo esperar que la generación de ustedes esté de acuerdo, ya que incluso mi hija discrepa de mí.

—No haga caso de nosotros ni de ella. ¡Diga lo que piensa!

—A veces pienso que habría que dejar la acción y la discusión a los hombres.

Hubo un breve silencio.

—Hay que admitir que los argumentos contrarios al sufragio son extraordinariamente poderosos —dijo una joven inclinándose sobre la mesa y desmenuzando el pan.

—¿Ah, sí? Yo nunca sigo los argumentos. Sólo doy gracias a Dios por no tener que votar.

—No nos referíamos al voto —añadió Margaret—. Dígame, mistress Wilcox, ¿existe alguna diferencia esencial entre nosotras y los hombres? Me pregunto si hemos de permanecer donde hemos estado desde el principio de la historia o si, ya que los hombres han avanzado tanto, no podemos nosotras avanzar un poco. Yo creo que sí podemos. Admito incluso un cambio biológico.

—No sé, no sé.

—Tendremos que volver a los almacenes colgantes —dijo el hombre—. Las cosas se han puesto muy ásperas.

Mistress Wilcox se levantó.

—Oh, quédese un rato más. Miss Quested va a tocar el piano. ¿Le gusta McDowell? ¿No cree que sus composiciones no son más que ruidos? Si tiene que irse, la acompañaré. ¿No tomará café, al menos?

Salieron del comedor cerrando la puerta tras de sí. Mientras mistress Wilcox se abrochaba la chaqueta, dijo:

—¡Qué vida tan interesante llevan ustedes en Londres!

—No, no es cierto —dijo Margaret con súbita revulsión—. Llevamos una vida de monos chiflados. Mistress Wilcox, de veras, en el fondo todos tenemos algo tranquilo y estable. Créalo. Todos mis amigos lo tienen. No me diga que le ha gustado esta reunión,

porque no es verdad: le ha desagradado profundamente. Pero discúlpeme viniendo otra vez, sola, o invitándome a ir a verla.

—Estoy acostumbrada a los jóvenes —dijo mistress Wilcox, y a cada palabra que decía, el contorno de las cosas sabidas se iba volviendo más y más oscuro—. Oigo muchas conversaciones en mi casa, porque nosotros, como ustedes, llevamos una vida social muy activa. Allá se habla más de deportes y de política, pero... me gustó esta reunión. Mucho. Miss Schlegel, querida, no estoy mintiendo y sólo desearía poderme quedar un rato más. Por una parte, hoy no me encuentro muy bien y, por otra, ustedes los jóvenes se mueven a un ritmo tan rápido que me aturden. Charles es igual y Dolly, también. Pero todos, viejos y jóvenes, estamos en la misma barca. Yo nunca lo olvido.

Guardaron silencio por unos instantes. Luego, con una emoción renovada, se estrecharon las manos. La conversación se interrumpió súbitamente cuando Margaret volvió al comedor: sus amigos habían estado hablando de la nueva adquisición y habían acabado por considerarla «persona carente de interés».

CAPÍTULO X

Pasaron varios días.

¿Sería mistress Wilcox una de esas personas decepcionantes que tanto abundan y que primero ofrecen su amistad y luego la retiran? Una de esas personas que despiertan nuestro interés y nuestro afecto, que atraen nuestro espíritu y luego se desvanecen. Cuando esta relación implica pasión física recibe un nombre muy concreto: flirteo, y si se lleva hasta las últimas consecuencias, está penado por la ley. Pero no hay ley, ni siquiera opinión pública, que castigue a quienes flirtean con la amistad, aunque el dolor que inflijan y la sensación de esfuerzo baldío y de desaliento puedan ser tanto más insufribles. ¿Era mistress Wilcox una de esas personas?

Margaret lo temió al principio. Con impaciencia londinense, Margaret quería que todo se solucionara inmediata y definitivamente y desconfiaba de los periodos de calma necesarios para el desarrollo de los acontecimientos. Deseosa de agenciarse la amistad de mistress Wilcox, recurrió al ceremonial, lápiz en mano, tanto más insistente cuanto que la ausencia del resto de la familia le proporcionaba una oportunidad favorable. Pero mistress Wilcox no tenía prisa. Rehusó mezclarse con el grupo de Wickham Place o reemprender la discusión sobre Helen y Paul, a la que Margaret había recurrido como vínculo idóneo entre ambas. Lo tomó con calma, dejó que el tiempo hiciera su labor y, cuando llegó el momento, todo estaba preparado.

La crisis se inició con un mensaje: ¿querría miss Schlegel ir de compras con ella? Las Navidades se acercaban y aún no había comprado los regalos. Mistress Wilcox había pasado varios días en la

cama y tenía que recuperar el tiempo perdido. Margaret aceptó y a las once de una triste mañana salieron de compras en una berlina.

—Ante todo —dijo Margaret— tenemos que hacer una lista y tachar los nombres que vayamos eliminando. Mi tía siempre lo hace así, y esta niebla puede espesarse en cualquier momento. ¿Tiene usted alguna idea?

—Pensé que podíamos ir a Harrod's o a los almacenes de Haymarket —dijo mistress Wilcox con desgana—. Allí tienen de todo. No soy buena compradora. El bullicio me aturde y su tía tiene razón: hay que hacer una lista. Coja mi cuaderno de notas y escriba su nombre en primer lugar.

—¡Fantástico! —dijo Margaret escribiéndolo—. ¡Es muy amable al empezar por mí! —pero no quería que le regalasen nada caro. Su amistad era singular más que íntima y adivinaba que el clan de los Wilcox se molestaría por un gasto realizado en un extraño, como suele suceder en las familias muy unidas. No quería que la considerasen una segunda Helen, que les arrebataba regalos ya que no podía arrebatarles a los hombres; y mucho menos quería exponerse, como una segunda tía Juley, a los insultos de Charles. Era mejor una cierta austeridad, y añadió—: De todos modos, no quiero un regalo de Navidad. Prefiero que no me haga ninguno.

—¿Por qué?

—Porque tengo una idea muy especial de las Navidades. Porque tengo todo lo que puede comprarse con dinero. Lo que quiero son más personas, no más cosas.

—Me gustaría regalarle algo en prueba de amistad, miss Schlegel, en recuerdo de su amabilidad durante estas dos semanas de soledad que acabo de pasar. Me han dejado sola y usted ha impedido que me asaltasen los temores que asaltan a las personas solitarias. A mí me ocurre a menudo.

—Si es así —dijo Margaret—, si le he sido de alguna utilidad, cosa que no sabía, no puede pagarme con nada material.

—Supongo que no, pero me gustaría. Quizá se me ocurra algo viendo escaparates.

El nombre de Margaret se quedó encabezando la lista, pero ningún otro nombre se añadió al suyo. Deambularon de tienda en

tienda. El aire era blanco y opaco y cada vez que salían al exterior, tenía el sabor de las monedas frías. De vez en cuando, atravesaban una nube gris. La vitalidad de mistress Wilcox era muy baja aquella mañana y era Margaret la que decidía la compra de un caballito para esta niña, de una muñeca para aquélla, de una bandeja de cobre para la esposa del rector. «Siempre damos dinero a los criados.» «Ah, sí, sí, es mucho más práctico», contestaba Margaret, pero sentía el grotesco impacto de lo invisible sobre lo visible y veía salir aquel torrente de dinero y juguetes de un olvidado portal de Belén. Las tabernas, además de las habituales exhortaciones contra la templanza, invitaban a los hombres a «unirse a nuestro club de Navidad»: una botella de ginebra o dos, según la suscripción. En un letrero, una mujer en mallas anunciaba la función (pantomímica) de Navidad, y los pequeños demonios rojos que habían salido otra vez aquel año privaban sobre las tarjetas navideñas. Margaret no era una idealista. No pretendía que se reprimiese la avalancha comercial y publicitaria. Simplemente, cada año se renovaba su sorpresa. De todos aquellos compradores vacilantes, de todos aquellos cansados vendedores, ¿cuántos comprendían que los hermanaba un acontecimiento divino? Margaret lo comprendía, aún sintiéndose al margen. No era cristiana en un sentido estricto; no creía que Dios hubiese vivido jamás entre nosotros encarnado en un joven artesano. La gente, o al menos la inmensa mayoría, lo creía así y, presionada en este sentido, lo confesaba en alta voz. Sin embargo, los signos visibles de sus creencias eran Regent Street y Drury Lane, un poco de barro desplazado, un poco de dinero gastado, unas pocas viandas guisadas, comidas y olvidadas. Incongruente. Pero ¿cómo expresar en público lo invisible de un modo congruente? Sólo la vida privada sostiene un espejo que refleja el infinito; sólo las relaciones personales, y no otras, apuntan a una realidad existente más allá de nuestra imagen cotidiana.

—No, en conjunto, me gustan las Navidades —proclamó—. A su torpe manera, hablan de Paz y de Buena Voluntad, pero, ay, más torpemente cada año.

—¿Sí? Yo, la verdad, sólo conozco las Navidades en el campo.

—Nosotros solemos pasarlas en Londres y seguimos el juego con absoluta seriedad: villancicos en la Abadía, comida especial, cena

para los criados, árbol de Navidad y baile para los niños pobres con canciones a cargo de Helen. El salón va muy bien para esta ceremonia. Nos metemos los tres en el cuartito trastero y corremos la cortina cuando se encienden las velas. Con el espejo detrás, el efecto es muy bonito. Ojalá encontremos una casa con trastero. Por supuesto, el árbol ha de ser muy pequeño y los regalos no están colgados. No, los regalos están sobre una especie de paisaje rocoso hecho de papel marrón, arrugado.

—¿Habló usted de encontrar una casa, miss Schlegel? ¿Cómo? ¿Se van de Wickham Place?

—Sí, dentro de dos o tres años, cuando expire el arrendamiento [6]. No hay más remedio.

—¿Llevan mucho tiempo en ella?

—Toda nuestra vida.

—Sentirán mucho dejarla, claro.

—Supongo que sí. Aún no nos hemos hecho a la idea. Mi padre... —se calló porque habían llegado a la sección de papelería de los Almacenes de Haymarket y mistress Wilcox quería encargar unas felicitaciones.

—A ser posible, algo distinto —dijo suspirando. En el departamento encontró a una amiga, entregada a la misma búsqueda, y conversó con ella insípidamente, con la consiguiente pérdida de tiempo.

—Mi marido y mi hija están de viaje, en coche. ¿Bertha también? ¡Vaya, qué coincidencia! —Margaret, a pesar de su natural poco práctico, podía brillar en semejante compañía. Mientras las dos señoras hablaban revisó un montón de modelos de felicitaciones y sometió uno a la aprobación de mistress Wilcox. Mistress Wilcox se quedó encantada: qué original, qué frases más cariñosas. Encargó un centenar como aquélla y quedó eternamente agradecida. Luego, cuando el dependiente estaba tomando nota del encargo, dijo:

—¿Sabe qué? Esperaré. Bien pensado, voy a esperar. Sobra tiempo, ¿no?, y me gustaría saber la opinión de Evie.

Volvieron al coche por un tortuoso camino. Una vez instaladas, mistress Wilcox dijo:

—¿Y no podrían renovarlo?

—¿Perdón? —dijo Margaret.

—Me refiero al arrendamiento.

—¡Ah, el arrendamiento! ¿Ha estado usted pensando en esto todo el rato? ¡Qué amable!

—Supongo que se podría hacer algo.

—No. Los terrenos han subido muchísimo de precio. Quieren derribar Wickham Place y edificar pisos como el suyo.

—¡Qué horror!

—Sí, los propietarios son horribles.

Mistress Wilcox dijo con vehemencia:

—Es monstruoso, miss Schlegel. Eso no está bien. Yo no sabía lo que se les venía encima. Les compadezco de todo corazón. Verse alejadas de su casa, de la casa de su padre... no tendrían que permitir una cosa así. Es peor que la muerte. Preferiría morirme antes que... ¡Oh, pobres chicas! ¿Qué clase de civilización es ésta en la que una persona no puede morir en la habitación en que nació? Querida, querida, lo siento muchísimo.

Margaret no sabía qué decir. Mistress Wilcox estaba muy cansada por las compras y mostraba una clara tendencia a la histeria.

—En cierta ocasión estuvieron a punto de derribar Howards End. Me habría muerto.

—El caso de Howards End es distinto. Nos gusta nuestra casa, pero no tiene nada que la distinga de las demás. Ya la vio usted, es una típica casa londinense. Encontraremos otra con facilidad.

—¿Usted cree?

—Ya veo: hablo así por mi típica inexperiencia —dijo Margaret desviando la cuestión—. No sé qué decir cuando usted adopta este aire, mistress Wilcox. Me gustaría verme como usted me ve: como una rata sabia. La perfecta ingenua. Encantadora, muy instruida para mi edad, pero incapaz de...

A mistress Wilcox nadie la desviaba de su camino.

—Véngase conmigo a Howards End ahora mismo —dijo con más vehemencia que nunca—. Quiero que lo vea. Usted no lo conoce y me gustaría oír su opinión, porque se explica usted muy requetebién.

Margaret miró el aire inclemente y la cara cansada de su compañera.

—Lo haré con mucho gusto más adelante —replicó—, pero no está el tiempo para esa expedición y hay que emprenderla con fuerzas renovadas, ¿no le parece? La casa estará cerrada, supongo.

No recibió contestación. Mistress Wilcox parecía molesta.

—¿Podré ir otro día?

Mistress Wilcox se inclinó hacia delante y golpeó el cristal.

—¡A Wickham Place, por favor! —ordenó al cochero. Margaret acababa de recibir una reprimenda.

—Muchísimas gracias por su ayuda, miss Schlegel.

—De nada.

—Ha sido un alivio que me solucionara el problema de los regalos... y de las felicitaciones, sobre todo. Admiro su buen gusto en la elección.

Le había llegado el turno de no recibir respuesta. Margaret, a su vez, se sentía ofendida.

—Mi marido y Evie estarán de vuelta pasado mañana. Por eso hemos ido de compras hoy. Yo me quedé en la ciudad especialmente para ir de compras, pero no he hecho nada a derechas y ahora me han escrito diciendo que tienen que interrumpir el viaje, porque el tiempo es muy malo y la policía, muy antipática, casi tan antipática como en Surrey. Nuestro chófer es muy cuidadoso y a mi marido le molesta enormemente que le traten como si fuera un vulgar infractor.

—¿Por qué?

—Bueno, pues, porque... porque no es un vulgar infractor, naturalmente.

—Deduzco que sobrepasó el límite de velocidad y, en tal caso, ¿qué puede esperar, sino que le traten como a un delincuente?

Mistress Wilcox guardó silencio. En una tensión creciente regresaron a casa. La ciudad tenía un aspecto satánico y las calles estrechas oprimían como las galerías de una mina. La niebla, alta a la sazón, no impedía las ventas y los escaparates iluminados de las tiendas aparecían atestados de clientes. La niebla ensombrecía más bien el espíritu, que se replegaba sobre sí mismo para encontrar en su interior una oscuridad aún más lóbrega. Margaret estuvo a punto de hablar en una docena de ocasiones, pero la voz se ahogaba en su garganta. Se sintió torpe, mezquina; sus reflexiones sobre la Navidad se volvieron cada vez más cínicas. ¿Paz? Quizá la Navidad traiga otros dones, pero ¿hay un sólo londinense para quien la Navidad sea pacífica? No, el ansia y la excitación de los preparativos han arruinado esta bendición. ¿Buena voluntad? ¡Bah! ¿Habían visto alguna muestra de buena voluntad en las hordas de compradores? ¿O en ella misma? No había aceptado la invitación por considerarla extraña y fantasiosa... ella, cuyo blasón era fomentar la fantasía. Habría sido mejor aceptar y fatigarse un poco que contestar fríamente: «¿Podré ir otro día?» El cinismo la abandonó. No habría otra ocasión. Aquella mujer sombría ya no volvería a invitarla.

Se separaron frente a las Mansions. Mistress Wilcox entró, tras los consabidos formalismos, y Margaret se quedó contemplando su figura alta y solitaria adentrarse por el zaguán hacia los ascensores. Cuando las puertas de cristal se cerraron, tuvo la sensación de que presenciaba un encarcelamiento. Primero desapareció la hermosa cabeza, oculta en la pelliza; luego, el largo vestido. Una mujer de rareza indefinible ascendía a los cielos como un ser especial, metido en una botella. ¡Y a qué cielo! Una bóveda infernal, negra de hollín, de la que descendían tiznones.

Durante la comida, Tibby, viendo el mutismo de Margaret, se empeñó en hablar. No es que el muchacho fuera perverso por naturaleza, pero ya desde la infancia había mostrado una tendencia irresistible a la inoportunidad. Aquella vez rindió a su hermana un extenso informe sobre sus actividades en el colegio, al que asistía con agrado de vez en cuando. El tema era interesante y la propia Margaret lo sacaba a menudo a colación, pero esta vez no podía concentrarse en las explicaciones de su hermano, porque su atención se dirigía al reino de lo invisible. Se daba cuenta de que mistress Wilcox, aunque amante esposa y madre ejemplar, sólo

tenía una pasión en su vida: su casa, y que invitar a alguien a compartir con ella su pasión era un acontecimiento solemne. Contestar «otro día» era contestar como una tonta. «En otra ocasión» era una fórmula válida para las casas de ladrillos y cemento, pero no para el sanctasanctórum en que se había transfigurado Howards End. Margaret sentía por el lugar una curiosidad muy relativa. Aquel verano había oído hablar de Howards End sobradamente. Las nueve ventanas, el emparrado y el olmo no tenían gratas implicaciones para ella y habría preferido pasar la tarde en un concierto. Pero la imaginación triunfó. Mientras su hermano seguía dale que dale, decidió ir a toda costa y obligar a mistress Wilcox a ir con ella. Cuando terminó la comida, salió y se dirigió a los apartamentos de enfrente.

Mistress Wilcox acababa de salir y no regresaría aquella noche.

Margaret dijo que no importaba, corrió escaleras abajo, tomó un coche de punto y le ordenó ir a la estación de King's Cross. Estaba convencida de que esta escapada era importante, aunque no habría sabido decir por qué. Era una cuestión de encarcelamiento y fuga y, aunque ignoraba el horario del tren, buscaba febrilmente con los ojos el reloj de Saint Pancras.

Ante ella apareció el reloj de King's Cross como una segunda luna de miel de aquel firmamento infernal, y el coche se detuvo delante de la estación. A los cinco minutos salía un tren para Hilton. Tomó un billete de ida, olvidando en su agitación pedirlo de ida y vuelta. Mientras lo hacía, una voz seria y feliz la saludó y le dio las gracias.

—Me gustaría ir con usted, si aún estoy a tiempo —dijo Margaret riendo nerviosamente.

—Te quedarás a pasar la noche también, querida. Por la mañana mi casa es mucho más bonita. Quédate. No te puedo enseñar bien el prado más que a la salida del sol. Esta niebla —señaló al techo de la estación— nunca se extiende muy lejos. Casi me atrevería a decir que en Hertfordshire están sentados al sol. No te arrepentirás de haber venido.

—Nunca me arrepentiré de ir con usted.

—Eso es lo que acabo de decir.

Empezaron a andar por el andén al fondo del cual estaba formado el tren, encarando la oscuridad exterior. No llegaron a tomarlo. Antes de que la imaginación triunfase, se oyeron gritos de «¡Madre! ¡Madre!» y una jovencita de espesas cejas salió corriendo de la sala de espera y agarró a mistress Wilcox por el brazo.

—¡Evie! —tartamudeó ella—. ¡Evie, mi niña querida!

La niña gritó:

—¡Padre! ¡Mira quién está aquí!

—¡Evie, querida! ¿Cómo no estáis en Yorkshire?

—El coche se averió y cambiamos los planes. Ahí viene papá.

—¡Ruth! —exclamó míster Wilcox uniéndose al grupo—. Ruth, en nombre del cielo, ¿qué haces aquí?

Mistress Wilcox se había recobrado de la sorpresa.

—¡Henry, qué sorpresa más estupenda! Oh, pero, permíteme que te presente... aunque creo que ya conoces a miss Schlegel.

—Sí —respondió el hombre sin demasiado interés—. ¿Cómo estás, Ruth?

—Fresca como una rosa —contestó ella alegremente.

—Nosotros también. El coche iba de maravilla, ¿sabes?... fuimos por la Nacional I hasta Rippon, pero allí, un carro y un caballo desvencijados, conducidos por un cretino...

—Miss Schlegel, tendremos que dejar nuestra salida para otra ocasión.

—Te decía que el idiota del carretero, como reconoció incluso la policía...

—Por supuesto, mistress Wilcox; en otra ocasión.

—...De todas formas, como estamos asegurados contra terceros, no importa...

—...El coche y el carro estaban prácticamente en ángulo recto...

Las voces de la familia feliz iban subiendo de tono. Margaret se quedó sola. Nadie la necesitaba. Mistress Wilcox salió de King's Cross entre su marido y su hija, escuchando a ambos al mismo tiempo.

CAPÍTULO XI

El funeral había concluido. Los carruajes se alejaban por el fango y sólo los pobres de la localidad se demoraban en el cementerio. Se acercaron a la fosa recién cavada y miraron por última vez el ataúd, casi oculto por las paletadas de tierra. Era su momento. La mayoría de los rezagados eran vecinas de la difunta, revestidas de ornamentos negros por orden de míster Wilcox. Los demás asistían atraídos por la curiosidad. Una muerte, y más una muerte repentina, les conmovía con auténtica excitación. Formaban grupos o deambulaban entre las tumbas, como manchas de tinta. El hijo de una de aquellas mujeres, leñador de profesión, podaba el olmo del cementerio encaramado sobre las cabezas de la concurrencia. Veía desde su observatorio la villa de Hilton, que se extendía a ambos lados de la carretera del Norte, con sus dilatados aledaños; el ocaso, escarlata y oro, que parpadeaba en el confín del firmamento grisáceo; la iglesia; las plantaciones, y, finalmente, a sus espaldas, la vasta campiña, salpicada de prados y granjas. El leñador desgranaba con sus palabras el acontecimiento, en un intento de traducir a su madre, que estaba debajo, las sensaciones que le habían embargado: la llegada del ataúd, la imposibilidad de abandonar su atalaya y sus deseos de interrumpir el trabajo, la sorpresa que casi le había hecho caer del árbol, el graznido de las cornejas, que presentían la causa del ceremonial. La madre, a su vez, se atribuía poderes proféticos: en los últimos tiempos había advertido un aspecto extraño en mistress Wilcox. Londres había acabado con ella, decían otros. Era una dama muy gentil, como lo fuera en tiempos su abuela: persona de más sencilla condición, pero muy gentil. ¡Ay, ya no quedaba gente así, de la vieja escuela! También míster Wilcox era un caballero muy gentil, por supuesto. Y

así, exaltados, volvían al tópico una y otra vez. Los funerales de un rico eran para ellos lo que para una persona cultivada son los funerales de Alcestes o de Ofelia: una obra de Arte; y como tal los contemplaban ávidamente, como algo al margen de sus vidas que, sin embargo, aportaba a éstas una nueva dimensión.

Los sepultureros, adoptando una actitud de desaprobación —les desagradaba Charles Wilcox; no es momento de hablar de estas cosas, pero les desagradaba Charles Wilcox—, dieron fin a su trabajo. Apilaron coronas y cruces sobre la tumba. El sol se puso en Hilton: las cejas negras de la noche enrojecieron levemente y un ceño escarlata las partió. Charlando tristemente, el cortejo atravesó la verja y la avenida de castaños que llevaba al pueblo. El joven leñador se quedó un rato más, posado sobre el silencio, balanceándose rítmicamente. Cayó la rama bajo su sierra. Con un gruñido descendió del árbol, alejados ya sus pensamientos de la muerte y puestos en el amor, porque tenía una cita esa misma noche. Un ramillete de crisantemos oscuros le llamó la atención. «No debería haber flores de colores en los entierros», pensó. Anduvo un poco, se detuvo, escudriñó furtivamente la oscuridad, se volvió, arrancó un crisantemo del ramillete y lo ocultó en el bolsillo.

Tras él se hizo un absoluto silencio. El pabellón adosado al muro del cementerio se encontraba vacío y la casa más próxima estaba lejos. Hora tras hora, la escena del sepelio quedó sin ojos que la miraran. Unas nubes procedentes del oeste se acumularon en el cielo; la iglesia parecía un barco de alta proa, navegando con su cargamento hacia el infinito. Al amanecer, el aire se volvió más frío; el firmamento, más claro; la superficie de la tierra, dura y brillante sobre la fosa. El leñador, de regreso a su trabajo tras una noche de placer, se iba diciendo a sí mismo: «Lilas, crisantemos... lástima no haberlos cogido todos.» Era la hora del desayuno de Howards End. Charles, Evie y la esposa de aquél se hallaban en el comedor. Míster Wilcox, que no quería ver a nadie, desayunaba arriba. Su sufrimiento era tan agudo que sentía intermitentes espasmos de dolor físico. Los ojos arrasados en lágrimas, intentaba comer, pero no lograba llevarse un solo bocado a los labios.

Pensaba en la bondad de su mujer, inalterable a lo largo de treinta años. No recordaba nada en concreto —ni el noviazgo, ni los primeros raptos amorosos—, sólo la invariable virtud, la más noble

cualidad de una mujer, en su opinión. Muchas mujeres son caprichosas, incurren en faltas peregrinas, por pasión o por frivolidad. Su mujer, no. Año tras año, en verano como en invierno, como esposa y como madre, Ruth había sido la misma; él había confiado en ella. ¡Y su ternura! ¡Y su inocencia! ¡Aquella maravillosa inocencia que era en ella un don de Dios! Ruth ignoraba la malicia y la sabiduría del mundo, como las flores del jardín y como la hierba del prado. Sus ideas sobre los negocios —«Henry, ¿por qué la gente que ya tiene suficiente dinero quiere tener más?»—, sobre la política —«Estoy segura de que si las madres de varias naciones pudieran reunirse, no habría más guerras»—. Sus ideas sobre la religión... bueno, en ese terreno se cruzó una nube, pero una nube pasajera. Ella procedía de una secta cuáquera y él y su familia, antes disentistas, eran miembros por entonces de la Iglesia anglicana. Los sermones del rector la habían repelido al principio. Expresó sus deseos de «una luz más íntima», añadiendo, «no tanto por mí como por el pequeño» (Charles). Seguramente aquella luz íntima le fue otorgada, porque no volvió a quejarse en los últimos años. Educaron a sus tres hijos sin disputas. Nunca, jamás discutieron.

Y ahora reposaba bajo la tierra. Se había ido y, como si hubiera querido hacer su marcha más amarga, se había ido con un toque de misterio impropio de ella. «¿Por qué no me dijiste que lo sabías?», se había lamentado él; y ella, con voz débil, había contestado: «No quise, Henry, podía estar equivocada, y todo el mundo odia las enfermedades.» Un médico desconocido le había puesto al corriente del horror, un médico al que había consultado mientras él estaba ausente de la ciudad. ¿Había sido justo? Murió sin dar una explicación completa. Era una falta por su parte, pero —y las lágrimas se agolparon en sus ojos— ¡qué pequeña falta! El único engaño en treinta años.

Se levantó y miró por la ventana, porque acababa de entrar Evie con el correo y no toleraba el encuentro con unos ojos ajenos. Ah, sí, había sido una buena mujer. Había sido una mujer firme. Escogió esta palabra deliberadamente. Para él, la firmeza abarcaba todo elogio.

El mismo, contemplando el jardín invernal, poseía la apariencia de un hombre firme. Su rostro no era tan cuadrado como el de su

hijo. A decir verdad, su mentón, aunque de trazo enérgico, se hundía ligeramente y los labios, ambiguos, quedaban ocultos bajo el bigote. Pero no había señal externa de debilidad en sus facciones. Los ojos, si bien capaces de amabilidad y camaradería, aun enrojecidos en aquel momento por las lágrimas, eran los ojos de quien no admite órdenes. La frente, asimismo, era la de Charles: alta y recta, cetrina y tersa, bruscamente achatada en las sienes y el cráneo, producía el efecto de un bastión que protegía su cabeza del mundo y, a veces, de un muro sin aberturas. Tras aquel muro había vivido, intacto y feliz, cincuenta años.

—Ha llegado el correo, papá —dijo Evie con torpeza.

—Gracias, déjalo ahí.

—¿Todo bien?... ¿el desayuno?

—Sí, sí, gracias.

La muchacha miró dubitativa, primero a su padre, luego al desayuno. No sabía qué hacer.

—Pregunta Charles si quieres el *Times.*

—No. Lo leeré luego.

—Llama si quieres algo, papá.

—Ya tengo todo lo que quiero.

Después de separar las cartas de los impresos, la muchacha bajó al comedor.

—Papá no ha comido nada —anunció sentándose con el ceño fruncido junto al hornillo del té.

Charles no respondió. A poco, se levantó, corrió escaleras arriba, abrió la puerta y dijo:

—Oye, papá, tienes que comer, ¿sabes? —y después de una pausa en espera de una respuesta que no vino, volvió a bajar—. Me parece que primero va a leer la correspondencia —dijo evasivamente—. Creo que desayunará después —cogió el *Times* y durante un rato no hubo otro sonido que el golpecito de la taza en el plato y el cuchillo en la bandeja.

La pobre esposa de Charles se sentaba entre sus silenciosos compañeros, amilanada por el curso de los acontecimientos y un

poco aburrida. Era una criatura timorata y lo sabía. Un telegrama le había hecho venir desde Nápoles al lecho de una moribunda a la que apenas conocía. Una palabra de su esposo la había hundido en un mundo de lamentos. Quería compartir íntimamente el dolor de la familia, pero también deseaba que mistress Wilcox, condenada como estaba a morir, hubiese muerto antes de su boda, porque de ese modo le habrían exigido menos compenetración. Desmigando su tostada, demasiado nerviosa para pedir la mantequilla, se quedó casi inmóvil, dando gracias a Dios de que su suegro hubiera elegido desayunar arriba.

Al final habló Charles.

—No estuvo nada bien que ayer precisamente les diera por podar los árboles —dijo a su hermana.

—Desde luego que no.

—He tomado buena nota —continuó—. Me sorprende que el rector lo permitiera.

—Quizá no fue cosa del rector.

—¿De quién, si no?

—Del dueño del terreno.

—Imposible.

—¿Mantequilla, Dolly?

—Gracias, Evie, querida. Charles...

—¿Sí, querida?

—No sabía que se podían podar los olmos. Yo creí que sólo se podaban los sauces.

—Oh, no. Se pueden podar también los olmos.

—Entonces, ¿por qué no se podían podar los olmos del cementerio?

Charles arrugó el entrecejo y se volvió a su hermana.

—Otra cosa. Tengo que hablar con Chalkeley.

—Sí, es verdad; tienes que quejarte a Chalkeley.

—No tiene ningún derecho a decir que no responde de esos hombres. Ya lo creo que responde.

—Claro que sí.

Los dos hermanos no eran crueles. Hablaban así en parte porque querían poner a Chalkeley en su sitio —un deseo muy honesto— y en parte para eludir las cuestiones personales. Así actuaban siempre los Wilcox: sin conceder importancia a estos asuntos. O tal vez sí que comprendían su importancia, pero la temían, como había supuesto Helen, dejando traslucir en su actitud el pánico y el vacío. Pero no eran crueles ni fríos, y abandonaron la mesa con el corazón compungido. Su madre, en vida, no solía bajar a desayunar, por lo que su ausencia se hacía más sensible en otras habitaciones y, especialmente, en el jardín. Camino del garaje, Charles iba recordando, a cada paso, a la mujer que le había querido y a la que nunca podría remplazar. ¡Cuántas batallas había librado él contra su tierno conservadurismo! ¡Cómo le desagradaban los adelantos y, sin embargo, con qué lealtad los aceptó cuando llegaron! ¡Qué trabajo les había costado, a él y a su padre, conseguir aquel garaje! ¡Con qué dificultad la habían convencido para que les cediese el cercado en que construirlo! ¿Y el emparrado? No habían tenido más remedio que cedérsela. La parra se encaramaba aún por la pared sur, con sus sarmientos improductivos. Lo mismo pensaba Evie, al tiempo que hablaba con la cocinera. Evie podía hacerse cargo del trabajo de la casa, al igual que su hermano podía hacerlo con respecto al jardín, pero ello no les impedía sentir que algo irremplazable había salido de sus vidas. La pena de los hijos, menos punzante que la de su padre, brotaba de más hondas raíces, porque se puede suplir a una esposa, pero jamás a una madre.

Charles quería volver a su oficina. No había nada que hacer en Howards End y conocía de antiguo el contenido del testamento de su madre. No había legados, ni pensiones, ni complicaciones póstumas con las que algunos muertos gustan de prolongar sus actividades. Confiando en su marido, se lo había dejado todo, sin reservas. Era una mujer pobre: la casa había sido su única dote, y la casa, en su momento, iría a parar a manos de Charles. Míster Wilcox reservaba los cuadros para Paul y para Evie las joyas y la lencería. ¡Con qué facilidad salió de la vida! Charles pensó que aquella era una loable actitud, aunque no tenía intención de adoptarla, en tanto que Margaret, de poder opinar, habría visto en semejante actitud una

indiferencia casi culpable ante la fama terrena. El cinismo —no el cinismo superficial de sonrisas y gruñidos, sino el cinismo compatible con la cortesía y la ternura— era la nota dominante del testamento de mistress Wilcox. No quería vejar a nadie. Conseguido esto, la tierra podía enfriarse sobre su cuerpo para siempre.

No, no había motivo para que Charles se quedara. No podía continuar su luna de miel, así que iría a Londres y trabajaría: se sentía incómodo sin hacer nada. Dolly y él se quedarían con el apartamento amueblado y su padre descansaría tranquilamente en el campo con Evie. Podía, de este modo, vigilar su nueva casita, en un suburbio de Surrey, a la sazón a medio pintar y decorar, en la que esperaba instalarse poco después de Navidad. Sí, iría en su coche después de comer. Los sirvientes de Londres, que habían acudido al funeral, regresarían en tren.

Encontró al chófer de su padre en el garaje. Le dijo: «Buenos días» sin mirarle a la cara e, inclinándose sobre el automóvil, continuó:

—¡Vaya, alguien ha usado mi coche nuevo!

—¿Sí, señor?

—Sí —dijo Charles enrojeciendo—, y quienquiera que lo haya usado no lo ha limpiado bien, porque hay barro en los ejes. Quítelo.

El hombre fue a buscar un trapo sin decir palabra. Era un chófer feísimo, lo cual no desagradaba a Charles, que consideraba el encanto masculino como algo enfermizo y que no había cejado hasta deshacerse del minúsculo efebo italiano que habían tenido al principio.

—Charles...

Su mujer le había seguido, sobre la escarcha helada, como una delicada columna negra sobre la cual la carita y el sombrero de luto formaban el capitel.

—Un momento, estoy ocupado. Bueno, Crane, ¿quién cree usted que lo ha usado?

—No lo sé, señor. Nadie lo ha usado desde que yo volví, pero, naturalmente, estuve fuera quince días con el otro automóvil, en Yorkshire.

El barro se desprendió con facilidad.

—Charles, tu padre está abajo. Algo ha sucedido. Quiere que vuelvas inmediatamente. ¡Oh, Charles!

—Espera, querida, espera un minuto. ¿Quién tenía la llave del garaje mientras usted estaba fuera, Crane?

—El jardinero, señor.

—¿Quiere usted decir que el viejo Penny sabe conducir un automóvil?

—No, señor; nadie utilizó el automóvil del señor.

—Entonces, ¿cómo se explica usted que haya barro en los ejes?

—No sé qué puede haber pasado mientras yo estaba en Yorkshire. Vea, señor, ya no hay barro.

Charles se sintió humillado. Aquel hombre le trataba como si fuera un tonto y, si su corazón no hubiera estado tan dolorido, se habría ido a quejar a su padre. Pero no era momento para quejas.

Ordenó que tuviesen el coche listo para después de comer y se reunió con su mujer que había estado hablando sin cesar de una historia incoherente acerca de una carta y de miss Schlegel.

—Bueno, Dolly, ya estoy por ti. ¿Qué pasa con miss Schlegel? ¿Qué quiere?

Cuando alguien escribía una carta, Charles siempre preguntaba qué quería. Querer algo era, para él, el único justificante de un acto. Y la pregunta, en este caso, era correcta, porque su mujer respondió:

—Quiere Howards End.

—¿Howards End? Ah, Crane, no se olvide de colocar la rueda Stepney.

—No, señor.

—Procure no olvidarse, porque... Vamos, mujercita.

Cuando estuvieron fuera del alcance del chófer, rodeó con el brazo la cintura de su mujer y la atrajo hacia sí. Todo su afecto y parte de su atención: esto le entregaba para toda una larga y dichosa vida matrimonial.

—No me has escuchado, Charles.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Te lo estoy diciendo: Howards End. Miss Schlegel lo tiene.

—¿Tiene el qué? —dijo Charles soltándola—. ¿De qué diantre estás hablando?

—Charles, prometiste no decir estas ordinarieces.

—Oye, no estoy de humor para tonterías. No es el día adecuado.

—Ya te lo he dicho. Hace rato que te lo vengo diciendo. Miss Schlegel es la dueña de Howards End. Tu madre se lo dejó y ahora vosotros os tendréis que ir.

—*¿Howards End?*

—*¡Howards End!* —gritó ella imitando los gestos de su marido. En aquel instante salió Evie corriendo de detrás de un matorral.

—¡Dolly, vuelve en seguida! Papá está muy enfadado contigo, Charles —se detuvo en seco—. Ve inmediatamente a ver a papá. Acaba de recibir una carta terrible.

Charles empezó a correr, se contuvo y continuó despacio por el sendero de grava. Ahí estaba la casa: las nueve ventanas, la parra estéril. Exclamó: «¡Las Schlegel otra vez!» y Dolly, para completar el caos, añadió: «¡Oh, no, ha sido la enfermera la que ha escrito!»

—¡Venid los tres! —gritó el padre saliendo de su inercia—. Dolly, ¿por qué me has desobedecido?

—Míster Wilcox, yo...

—Te dije que no fueras al garaje. Os he oído gritar en el jardín y eso no lo consiento. Entrad.

Estaba en el porche, transformado, con las cartas en la mano.

—Todos al comedor. No podemos discutir los asuntos privados delante del servicio. Toma, Charles, lee esto y dime qué hacemos.

Charles tomó las dos cartas y las leyó sucesivamente. La primera era una nota de la enfermera. Mistress Wilcox le había encargado que, concluido el funeral, enviara el documento adjunto. El documento adjunto era de su propia madre y decía así: «A mi marido: Deseo que Howards End pase a propiedad de miss Schlegel (Margaret).»

—Supongo que hay mucho que hablar —dijo con calma.

—Por supuesto. Iba a buscarte cuando Dolly...

—Está bien, sentémonos.

—Evie, no pierdas el tiempo, siéntate.

En silencio se reunieron en torno a la mesa del desayuno. Los acontecimientos del día anterior —o, mejor, los de aquella misma mañana— retrocedían súbitamente a un pasado tan remoto que los presentes dudaban haberlo vivido. Se oía la respiración pesada. Todos se iban calmando. Charles, para dar firmeza a los allí reunidos, procedió a leer en alta voz:

—Una nota autógrafa de mi madre, en un sobre sellado, dirigido a mi padre. Dentro: «Deseo que Howards End pase a propiedad de miss Schlegel (Margaret).» Ni fecha ni firma. Enviado por la enfermera de la clínica. Bien, la cuestión es...

Dolly le interrumpió:

—Yo creo que esta nota no es legal. Los abogados tienen que intervenir en los asuntos de casas, Charles. Seguro.

Su marido apretó las mandíbulas con severidad. Una leve protuberancia apareció enfrente de cada oreja. Era un síntoma que Dolly aún no había aprendido a respetar y preguntó si podía ver la nota. Charles consultó con la mirada a su padre y éste dijo: «Dásela.» Dolly la tomó y exclamó de inmediato:

—¡Vaya, está escrita a lápiz! Ya lo decía yo. Los documentos escritos a lápiz no tienen valor.

—Ya sabemos que no es jurídicamente vinculante, Dolly —dijo míster Wilcox hablando desde su fortaleza—. Somos plenamente conscientes. Legalmente, tengo pleno derecho a romper esta nota y a echar los pedazos al fuego. Por supuesto, querida, todos te consideramos un miembro más de la familia, pero será mejor que no te entrometas en lo que no entiendes.

Charles, humillado por su padre y por su esposa, repitió:

—La cuestión es... —había despejado un rectángulo de la mesa de platos y cubiertos para poder hacer planes sobre el mantel—. La cuestión es saber si miss Schlegel, durante las dos semanas que estuvimos fuera, ilícitamente... —se detuvo.

—No lo creo —dijo el padre, de natural más noble que su hijo.

—¿No crees qué?

—Que estemos ante un caso de influencia ilícita. No, en mi opinión, la cuestión es la... el estado mental de... en el momento de escribir esta nota.

—Papá, consulta a un experto si quieres, pero yo no admito que ésta sea la letra de mamá.

—¡Pero si acabas de decir que sí! —dijo Dolly.

—¡No importa! —bramó Charles—. ¡Y cierra la boca!

La pobre mujercita se ruborizó y, sacando un pañuelo del bolsillo, se enjugó unas pocas lágrimas. Nadie le hizo caso. Evie estaba ceñuda como un muchacho irritado. Los dos hombres iban asumiendo paulatinamente aires de comisión parlamentaria. No cometieron el error de tratar los asuntos humanos a bulto, sino paso a paso y en profundidad. La caligrafía era el primer paso y hacia ella dirigieron sus adiestrados cerebros. Charles, después de unas objeciones, aceptó la letra como genuina, y pasaron al punto siguiente. Éste es el mejor método —quizá el único— para evitar las emociones. Eran hombres normales y corrientes y, si hubieran considerado la nota en conjunto, se habrían entristecido, tal vez habrían perdido los estribos. Considerada punto por punto, se minimizaba la carga emocional y se avanzaba suavemente. El reloj desgranaba su tic-tac, las brasas ardían pugnando contra la blanca radiación que inundaba la estancia a través de las ventanas. Inadvertido, el sol ocupó el firmamento y la sombra de las ramas del árbol, extraordinariamente sólida, cayó como surcos de purpura sobre los campos helados. Era una espléndida mañana invernal. El foxterrier de Evie, de pelaje blanco, parecía gris, sucio y rebajado, en comparación con la intensa pureza que le rodeaba. Perseguía mirlos que brillaban con la oscuridad de las noches de Arabia, porque todos los colores convencionales de la vida se habían alterado. Dentro, el reloj dio las diez con notas ricas y confiadas. Otros relojes lo confirmaron y la discusión tocó a su fin.

Es innecesario seguir. Aquí es cuando debe intervenir el comentarista. ¿Deberían los Wilcox haber ofrecido su casa a Margaret? Yo creo que no. La obligación era demasiado débil. El documento no era legal, había sido escrito por una enferma bajo el

influjo de un súbito sentimiento de amistad, era contrario a los deseos manifestados por la difunta en el pasado, era contrario, por último, a su naturaleza, al menos, en la medida en que los hombres entendían su naturaleza. Para ellos, Howards End era una casa. No podían saber que para ella había sido un espíritu para el que anhelaba un heredero espiritual. Y, avanzando un paso más en esta neblina, ¿no habían decidido mejor, tal vez, de lo que suponían? ¿Es posible legar las posesiones del espíritu? ¿Tiene descendencia el alma? ¿Puede transmitirse la pasión por un olmo, una parra, una gavilla de trigo cubierta de rocío, cuando no existen lazos de sangre? No, no hay que culpar a los Wilcox. El problema es demasiado profundo y ellos, por su parte, ni siquiera percibían el problema. No, es lógico y natural que tras el debido debate rasgaran la nota y la arrojasen al fuego del comedor. El moralista práctico estará sin duda de acuerdo con esta decisión. Quien intente profundizar más, estará de acuerdo parcialmente. Porque seguía existiendo un hecho inalterable: habían desobedecido una llamada personal. La mujer que acababa de morir les había dicho: «Haced esto», y ellos habían respondido: «No queremos.» El incidente les produjo una honda impresión. El resquemor penetró en sus cerebros y los minó sin descanso. Ayer se habían lamentado: «era una madre querida, una esposa fiel: en nuestra ausencia descuidó su salud y murió». Hoy pensaban: «no era tan querida ni tan fiel como pensábamos». Por fin el deseo de una luz más íntima había encontrado su expresión, lo invisible había hecho impacto en lo visible y todo lo que ellos podían decir era: «Traición.» Mistress Wilcox había traicionado a la familia, al derecho de propiedad, a su propia palabra escrita. ¿Cómo podía esperar que Howards End fuera transferido a miss Schlegel? ¿Iba a entregárselo su marido, a quien pertenecía legalmente, como si fuera un delicado presente? ¿Qué derecho adquiría miss Schlegel: el usufructo o la plena propiedad? ¿No iba a haber compensación por el garaje y las restantes mejoras realizadas con la certeza de que todo aquello sería suyo algún día? ¡Traidora! ¡Traidora y absurda! Cuando consideramos a un difunto traidor y absurdo estamos a punto de reconciliarnos con su desaparición. Aquella nota, garrapateada a lápiz y enviada por medio de la enfermera era tan ilegal como cruel y hacía decrecer de inmediato el valor de la mujer que la había escrito.

—Bueno —dijo míster Wilcox levantándose de la mesa—. Nunca pensé que ocurriría tal cosa.

—Mamá no quiso decir lo que pone ahí —dijo Evie con el ceño fruncido.

—No, hija, desde luego que no.

—Mamá creía tanto en los antecesores como en los sucesores. No es propio de ella dejar algo a un extraño que no sería capaz de apreciarlo.

—Todo esto es impropio de Ruth —afirmó él—. Si miss Schlegel fuese pobre, si necesitase una casa, quizá lo entendería. Pero ya tiene casa propia. ¿Para qué necesita otra? Howards End no le serviría de nada.

—El tiempo lo dirá —murmuró Charles.

—¿Cómo? —preguntó su hermana.

—Me imagino que debe de estar al corriente; mamá se lo habrá dicho. Fue a visitarla dos o tres veces a la clínica. Probablemente espera acontecimientos.

—¡Qué mujer más horrible! —y Dolly, que se había recobrado, gritó—: ¡Eh, a lo mejor está viniendo a echarnos!

—Ojalá venga —dijo Charles atajando el arrebato de su esposa. Y añadió en tono agorero—: Tendría unas palabritas con ella.

—Yo también —repitió su padre, que se sentía frío y calmado. Charles había sido muy amable al hacerse cargo de los trámites del entierro, al decirle que se tomara el desayuno; pero el chico, al hacerse mayor, adoptaba aires dictatoriales y asumía las funciones de presidente con demasiada rapidez—. Tendría unas palabras con ella si viniera, pero no vendrá. Sois un poco duros con miss Schlegel.

—Vamos, vamos, ¿has olvidado el escandaloso asunto de Paul?

—No quiero oír hablar más del asunto de Paul, Charles, ya te lo dije entonces; además, no tiene nada que ver con esto. Margaret Schlegel ha sido oficiosa y pesada esta terrible semana, todos hemos tenido que soportarla, ya lo sé. Pero estoy convencido de que es una persona honrada. No está en connivencia con la enfermera, de esto estoy seguro. Ni lo estaba con el médico; de eso también

estoy seguro. No nos ocultó nada, porque hasta esta misma tarde ha estado tan ignorante de los hechos como tú mismo. Tanto ella como nosotros hemos sido unos incautos —hizo una pausa—. Ya ves, Charles, tu pobre madre, en su dolor, nos colocó a todos en una posición falsa. Si lo hubiéramos sabido, Paul no se habría ido de Inglaterra, tú no te habrías ido a Italia, ni Evie y yo a Yorkshire. Bien, la posición de miss Schlegel es igualmente falsa. A fin de cuentas, no se ha comportado tan mal.

—Pero los crisantemos... —dijo Evie.

—¡Y presentarse en el funeral! —añadió Dolly.

—¿Por qué no había de hacerlo? Tenía derecho a venir, y se quedó atrás, con las mujeres de Hilton. En cuanto a las flores, es evidente que nosotros no las habríamos enviado, pero quizá a ella le pareció correcto, Evie, es posible que sea costumbre en Alemania.

—Ah, es verdad, olvidaba que no es inglesa —exclamó Evie—. Eso lo explica todo.

—Es una persona cosmopolita —dijo Charles consultando el reloj —. Admito que ando muy despistado con las personas cosmopolitas. Por mi culpa, sin duda. No las soporto, ésa es la verdad. Y una alemana cosmopolita ya es el colmo. En fin, creo que no hay más que hablar. Tengo que volver a Londres y ver a Chalkeley. Cogeré una bicicleta. Por cierto, me gustaría que hablases con Crane cuando te vaya bien. Estoy seguro de que ha estado usando mi coche nuevo.

—¿Lo ha estropeado?

—No.

—En ese caso, lo dejaré correr. No vale la pena armar una trifulca.

A veces Charles y su padre discrepaban, pero se profesaban un respeto recíproco y no había mejores camaradas cuando se trataba de recorrer el intrincado sendero de las emociones. Así atravesaron los marineros de Ulises el reino de las sirenas, después de sellarse mutuamente los oídos con tapones de lana.

CAPÍTULO XII

Charles no tenía por qué preocuparse. Miss Schlegel no sabía nada de los extraños designios de mistress Wilcox y no había de enterarse hasta pasados unos años, hasta que su vida hubiese tomado un giro radicalmente distinto, un giro en el que aquellos designios encajaban como una piedra angular. Por entonces, Margaret tenía centrada su atención en otras cosas y, de haber conocido el testamento de la difunta, lo habría considerado, al igual que los Wilcox, como la fantasía de un enfermo.

Por segunda vez, los Wilcox quedaban atrás. Paul y su madre, como una ola pequeña y otra grande, habían inundado su vida y se habían retirado para siempre. La ola pequeña no había dejado huellas a su paso; la grande había depositado a sus pies fragmentos de lo desconocido. Como un explorador curioso, Margaret había observado el mar desde la orilla, un mar que ocultaba mucho, pero algo revelaba. Fue testigo de la retirada del último y tremendo reflujo. Su amiga se había desvanecido en la agonía, que no en la decadencia. Una retirada que encerraba algo más que la enfermedad y el dolor. Unos desaparecen dejando tras de sí lágrimas y pena; otros, dejando una frialdad insana. Mistress Wilcox había partido por un camino intermedio, un camino que sólo alcanzan a seguir algunos extraños individuos. Había sabido mantener la proporción; había desvelado parte de su sombrío secreto a sus amigos, pero no mucho; había cerrado su corazón, pero no del todo. Así deberíamos morir, suponiendo que existiese alguna regla: ni víctimas ni fanáticos; como el navegante que contempla con la misma intensidad las profundidades en que se adentra y la orilla que debe abandonar.

La última palabra, fuese cual fuese, no se había dicho en el cementerio de Hilton. No había muerto allí. El funeral no equivale a la muerte, del mismo modo que el bautismo no equivale al nacimiento, ni el matrimonio a la unión. Las tres ceremonias son los torpes instrumentos por medio de los cuales la sociedad registra, demasiado tarde o demasiado pronto, el tránsito del hombre por la vida. A los ojos de Margaret, mistress Wilcox había escapado al registro, había abandonado la vida vivamente, a su modo, y no había polvo tan polvo como el que contenía el pesado sarcófago, pomposamente descendido hasta reposar en el polvo de la tierra; ni flores tan desperdiciadas como los crisantemos que la escarcha debió de marchitar antes del alba. Margaret había dicho una vez que «le gustaba la superstición». No era cierto. Pocas mujeres habían intentado tan seriamente como ella traspasar la amalgama que recubre el cuerpo y el alma. La muerte de mistress Wilcox le había ayudado en su trabajo; había arrojado una débil claridad en su idea de lo que es un ser humano, de lo que puede aspirar a ser. Las auténticas relaciones habían adquirido un leve resplandor. Tal vez la última palabra fuera esperanza; esperanza incluso a este lado de la tumba.

Mientras tanto, tenía que seguir centrando su interés en los supervivientes. A pesar de las Navidades, a pesar de su hermano, los Wilcox seguían ocupando un lugar preeminente en sus pensamientos. Había tenido mucho contacto con ellos en la última semana. No eran «de su clase». Suspicaces y estúpidos, les faltaba lo que a ella le sobraba. Pero la confrontación le estimulaba; sentía un interés que bordeaba la atracción, incluyendo en este fenómeno al propio Charles. Deseaba protegerlos y sentía a veces que ellos podían protegerla, sobrados como estaban de lo que a ella le faltaba. Una vez pasado el escollo de la emoción, sabían perfectamente qué hacer, a quién acudir; siempre tenían las riendas en la mano. Tenían, además, entereza, y Margaret valoraba en mucho la entereza. Llevaban otra vida, una vida que ella no podía llevar; la vida exterior, de «telegramas y furia», la vida que había hecho explosión cuando Helen y Paul trabaron contacto en junio, y había vuelto a explotar la semana pasada. Para Margaret, esta vida constituía una fuerza real. No podía despreciarla, como aparentaban hacer Helen y Tibby. En esa vida florecen virtudes como la precisión, la decisión y la obediencia, virtudes de segunda categoría, sí, pero

virtudes que han forjado nuestra civilización; virtudes que forjan también el carácter, Margaret no lo ponía en duda, impidiendo que el alma se ablande. ¿Cómo se atreverían los Schlegel a menospreciar a los Wilcox, cuando unos y otros son necesarios para construir un mundo?

«No le des muchas vueltas —escribió a Helen— a la superioridad de los invisibles sobre lo visible. Podrá ser cierta, pero dedicarse a ello resulta medieval. Lo que tenemos que hacer no es contrastarlos, sino reconciliar lo uno con lo otro.» Helen contestó que no tenía la menor intención de dar vueltas a un asunto tan aburrido. ¿Por quién la tomaba su hermana? El tiempo era magnífico. Los Mosebach y ella recorrían en trineo la única colina de que puede enorgullecerse la Pomerania. Era divertido, pero había mucha gente, porque toda la Pomerania se había concentrado allí. Helen adoraba el campo y su carta exultaba ejercicio físico y poesía. Hablaba del paisaje, tranquilo y majestuoso; de los campos nevados, atravesados por veloces manadas de ciervos; del río y de su pintoresca desembocadura en el mar Báltico; del Oderberge, el macizo formado por montes que no medían más de trescientos pies y desde los cuales se bajaba esquiando a las llanuras de la Pomerania, aunque no por ello dejaban de ser auténticos montes, con bosques de pinos, riachuelos y panoramas. «No cuenta tanto la magnitud como el modo en que las cosas están dispuestas.» En otro párrafo se refería a mistress Wilcox con cariño y condolencia, pero la noticia no le había afectado profundamente. No había captado todos los detalles accesorios de la muerte que son, en cierto sentido, más memorables que la misma muerte. La atmósfera de precauciones y recriminaciones en cuyo centro gravita un ser humano, cada vez más vivo porque sufre; el fin de este cuerpo en el cementerio de Hilton; la supervivencia de algo que sugería esperanza, vivo a su vez contra la alegría de la vida cotidiana; todo aquello era ajeno a Helen, que sólo percibía que una agradable dama había dejado de ser agradable de una vez por todas. Regresó a Wickham Place absorta en sus propios asuntos —había recibido una nueva proposición matrimonial— y Margaret, tras una momentánea vacilación, se alegró de que así fuera.

La proposición de marras no había sido nada serio. Fue más bien obra de fräulein Mosebach, que concibió la generosa y patriótica

idea de recuperar a sus primas a la tierra natal por medio del matrimonio. Inglaterra había jugado la baza de Paul Wilcox y había perdido; Alemania jugó la de herr no sé qué Förstmeister (Helen no recordaba siquiera su nombre). Herr Förstmeister vivía en el bosque y un día, desde la cima del Oderberge, señaló a Helen su casa o, mejor dicho, la espesura de pinos en la que se hallaba situada. Helen exclamó: «¡Oh, qué maravilla! En un lugar así desearía yo vivir.» Aquella noche, Frieda apareció en su dormitorio. «Querida Helen, traigo un mensaje», etcétera. En efecto, lo traía. No obstante, se mostró muy comprensiva cuando Helen soltó la carcajada; se hacía cargo, sí, un bosque muy solitario y umbrío, sí, aunque herr Förstmeister opinara lo contrario, claro. Alemania había perdido, pero había perdido con buen humor; portadora de la hombría del mundo, sabía que a la larga estaba destinada a ganar. «Hasta tienen algo preparado para ti, Tibby —concluyó Helen—, piénsalo bien. Frieda te tiene preparada una chica; una chica con coletas y medias de lana blancas, aunque los bajos de las medias son de color rosa, como si la chica hubiese pisado fresas. ¡Bueno! He hablado demasiado. Me duele la cabeza. Hablad vosotros ahora.»

Tibby condescendió en hablar. También él estaba absorto en sus asuntos. Acababa de pasar un examen para ingresar en Oxford. Los estudiantes estaban de vacaciones en sus casas, de modo que los candidatos se alojaron en diversos colegios y cenaron en el refectorio. Tibby era muy sensible a la belleza, la experiencia era nueva para él e hizo una descripción casi encendida de su visita. La Universidad, majestuosa y serena, empapada en la riqueza de los condados occidentales a los que había servido durante mil años, causó un fuerte impacto en el gusto del muchacho; pertenecía al mundo que Tibby entendía, y la entendió tanto más cuanto que estaba vacía. Oxford es... Oxford, no un mero receptáculo de la juventud, como Cambridge. Exige, quizá, que sus miembros amen a Oxford más de lo que se aman entre sí. En cualquier caso, ése era el efecto que había producido en Tibby. Sus hermanas lo enviaron allí para que hiciese amistades, conscientes de que su educación había sido excéntrica, de que le había distanciado de los demás chicos de su edad. Tibby no hizo amistades. Su Oxford siguió siendo un Oxford vacío y conservó aquella imagen toda su vida, no como el recuerdo de una cálida radiación, sino como el recuerdo de una armonía de colores.

Margaret se sintió satisfecha oyendo hablar a sus hermanos. Por lo general no se llevaban bien. Durante unos instantes, Margaret los escuchó sintiéndose madura y benigna. De pronto, algo le sucedió e interrumpió la conversación para decir:

—Helen, ¿te he contado ya lo de la pobre mistress Wilcox, ese asunto tan triste?

—Sí.

—He mantenido correspondencia con su hijo. Están poniendo en claro la situación patrimonial y me escribió para saber si su madre me había prometido dejarme algo. Me pareció un magnífico detalle por su parte, teniendo en cuenta lo poco que la traté. Le dije que una vez me había hablado de hacerme un regalo de Navidad, pero que ambas lo habíamos olvidado poco después.

—Espero que Charles pescara la indirecta.

—Sí. Es decir, el marido de mistress Wilcox me escribió dándome las gracias por haber sido tan amable con su esposa y me regaló un frasquito de sales de plata. Muy generoso, ¿no crees? Este gesto ha hecho que le tome afecto. Dijo que esperaba que esto no fuera el final de nuestra amistad y que le gustaría mucho que tú y yo fuésemos a pasar unos días con Evie en un futuro próximo. Me gusta míster Wilcox, francamente. Ha vuelto a sus negocios de caucho, un negocio de envergadura, ¿sabes? Creo que está rehaciendo su vida. Charles también anda metido en el negocio. Se ha casado con una chica muy mona, aunque no parece demasiado lista. Vivieron un tiempo ahí, en el apartamento de enfrente, pero ahora se han mudado a una casa de propiedad.

Helen, tras una discreta pausa, continuó contando cosas de Stettin. ¡Qué aprisa cambian las cosas! En junio había sufrido una crisis; en noviembre, aún se ruborizaba y actuaba con naturalidad afectada. Ahora, en enero, todo aquel asunto estaba olvidado. Recordando los pasados seis meses, Margaret comprendió la naturaleza caótica de nuestras vidas y su diferencia con la secuencia ordenada que urden los historiadores. La vida real está llena de pistas falsas y de señales que no conducen a ninguna parte. Nos fortalecemos, con infinito esfuerzo, para afrontar una crisis que no se produce jamás. La trayectoria más triunfal encubre un despilfarro de energías que podrían haber movido montañas; la vida

más infructuosa no es la del individuo que se ha visto sorprendido sin estar preparado, sino la del que se ha preparado y no ha sido nunca sorprendido. Sobre este tipo de tragedias nuestra moral nacional guarda silencio. Se presupone que la preparación contra el peligro es buena en sí y que las personas, como las naciones, deben ir dando tumbos por la vida armadas hasta los dientes. La tragedia de la preparación apenas ha sido tratada, salvo por los griegos. La vida es ciertamente peligrosa, pero no como la moral nos enseña. Es imposible gobernar la vida, pero su esencia no es una batalla; es imposible de gobernar porque la vida es un romance y su esencia es la belleza romántica.

Margaret confiaba en ser, en el futuro, menos cauta de lo que había sido en el pasado.

CAPÍTULO XIII

Pasaron más de dos años y la casa de los Schlegel continuó viviendo su vida holgada, culta sin vulgaridad, grácilmente a flote sobre las grises mareas de Londres. El dinero se gastó y se repuso envuelto en conciertos y representaciones teatrales, se ganaron y se perdieron prestigios y reputaciones y la ciudad, emblema de sus vidas, se alzó y cayó en un continuo flujo, mientras sus riberas bañaba cada vez más extensamente las colinas de Surrey y los campos de Hertfordshire. Se había construido aquel famoso edificio, aquel otro estaba sentenciado. Un día transformaban Whitehall, al día siguiente le tocaba el turno a Regent Steet. Mes tras mes las calles apestaban cada vez más a gasolina y eran más difíciles de cruzar, los seres humanos se oían entre sí con más dificultad, respiraban menos aire y veían menos cielo. La Naturaleza se batía en retirada: las hojas de los árboles caían a mediados del verano, el sol brillaba a través de la suciedad con opacidad insólita.

Ya no está de moda hablar mal de Londres. La tierra, como objeto de culto artístico, ha llegado a su fin; es posible que la literatura del futuro ignore el campo y busque su inspiración en la ciudad. Esta reacción es comprensible: el público ha oído hablar demasiado de Pan y de las fuerzas elementales. Estos temas resultan Victorianos. Londres, en cambio, es Georgiano. El que sienta la tierra con sinceridad tendrá que esperar muchos años hasta que el péndulo oscile de nuevo. Londres fascina. Su imagen es la imagen de un cuerpo gris y palpitante, de una inteligencia sin objeto, de una excitación sin amor; un espíritu que cambia sin dar tiempo a que se escriba su crónica; un corazón que late sin pulsación humana, más allá de cualquier otra cosa. La Naturaleza,

con toda su crueldad, está más próxima a nosotros que las muchedumbres. Un amigo se autojustifica; la tierra tiene una explicación: de la tierra venimos, a ella hemos de volver. Pero, ¿quién explicará lo que es Westminster Bridge Road o Liverpool Street por la mañana, cuando la ciudad inhala? ¿o esas mismas arterias por la tarde, cuando la ciudad exhala su aire viciado? Para justificar este monstruo investigamos concienzudamente, desesperadamente, más allá de la niebla, más allá de las estrellas, los más recónditos vacíos del universo y les damos rostros humanos. Londres podría ser la cuna de una nueva religión; no la religión decorosa de los teólogos, sino una religión antropomórfica y cruda. Sí, podríamos soportar esta marea incesante si un hombre como nosotros, y no un dios llorón y pomposo, se ocupara de nosotros desde el cielo.

El londinense raramente alcanza a comprender lo que es su ciudad hasta que ésta le corta las amarras. Y así, Margaret, que había tenido los ojos cerrados a la realidad, los abrió cuando expiró el arrendamiento de Wickham Place. Era consciente desde siempre de que el plazo tenía que expirar, pero esa conciencia no se materializó hasta nueve meses antes del término. Entonces la casa se llenó de una súbita emoción. Había sido testigo de mucha felicidad, ¿por qué había de perderse? En las calles de la ciudad Margaret percibió por primera vez la arquitectura de la prisa, oyó el lenguaje de la prisa en boca de sus habitantes: palabras cortadas, frases informes, expresiones concentradas de aprobación o disgusto. Mes tras mes las cosas se iban volviendo cada vez más vivas, pero ¿con qué objeto? La población seguía aumentado, pero ¿cuál era la calidad de los que nacían? El millonario que poseía el terreno de Wickham Place y quería erigir en él una Babilonia de pisos, ¿con qué derecho causaba tanta agitación? No era un tonto —Margaret le haría refutar la ideología socialista—, pero la verdad empezaba donde acababa su inteligencia, y habrá que pensar que éste es el caso de la mayoría de millonarios. ¿Qué derecho tenía aquel hombre? Margaret reprimió sus cábalas. Así se incuba la locura. Gracias a Dios, no les faltaba el dinero y podían adquirir una nueva casa.

Tibby, a la sazón en su segundo año en Oxford, había regresado a pasar con sus hermanas las vacaciones de Pascua y Margaret

aprovechó la ocasión para hablar con él seriamente. ¿Había pensado dónde quería vivir? Tibby no sabía lo que había pensado. ¿Había pensado qué quería hacer? Estaba indeciso. Convenientemente presionado, hizo constar que prefería abstenerse de trabajar. Margaret no se sorprendió. Continuó cosiendo unos minutos antes de replicar:

—Estaba pensando en míster Vyse. Nunca me ha parecido una persona especialmente feliz.

—Sí —dijo Tibby, y se quedó con la boca abierta, en curiosa vibración, como si él también hubiera pensado en míster Vyse, por, para, sobre y contra míster Vyse, como si hubiera sopesado, clasificado y, por último, desechado a míster Vyse por falta de posible relación con el tema debatido. Esta especie de balido de Tibby irritaba sobremanera a Helen. Pero Helen se encontraba en aquel momento abajo, en el comedor, preparando un discurso sobre economía política. De vez en cuando se oía su voz declamatoria a través del suelo.

—Míster Vyse es un tipo vegetativo, triste, ¿no te parece? Y ese Guy... oh, un asunto lastimoso. En mi opinión —añadió volviendo al tema general—, todo el mundo se siente mejor haciendo un trabajo permanente.

Un gruñido.

—Insisto —prosiguió Margaret con una sonrisa—, y no lo digo con intención didáctica. Me limito a expresar lo que pienso. Yo creo que durante los últimos cien años los hombres han desarrollado el deseo de trabajar y no hay que dejar que ese deseo se extinga. Es un deseo nuevo. Muchos lo consideran malo, pero es bueno en sí mismo y espero que pronto el «no trabajar» sea algo tan sorprendente para las mujeres como el «no estar casada» lo era hace un siglo.

—No tengo experiencia respecto a este profundo deseo a que aludes —enunció Tibby.

—En tal caso, dejaremos el tema para cuando la tengas. No voy a darte la lata. Piénsalo con calma. Sólo te pido que pienses en las personas que más te gustan y veas cómo han organizado sus vidas.

—Me gusta mucho Guy y míster Vyse —dijo Tibby lánguidamente y se apoltronó tanto en su asiento que quedó formando una línea horizontal de las rodillas al cuello.

—Y no creas que no hablo en serio porque no utilizo los argumentos tradicionales: el dinero, el triunfo y todo eso; argumentos que me parecen, por diversas razones, pura palabrería —continuó cosiendo—. Sólo soy tu hermana, no tengo ninguna autoridad sobre ti ni quiero tenerla. Intento explicarte lo que considero cierto, nada más. ¿Sabes? —se quitó las gafas de pinza que había empezado a usar recientemente—, dentro de unos años, no muchos, tú y yo tendremos prácticamente la misma edad y seré yo quien te pida consejo a ti. Los hombres sois más amables que las mujeres.

—Si tan decepcionada estás, ¿por qué no te casas?

—A veces creo que lo haría si se me presentase la oportunidad.

—¿Nadie te lo ha pedido?

—Sólo los tontorrones.

—¿Y Helen? ¿Ha tenido proposiciones?

—¡Huy, una barbaridad!

—Cuéntame quiénes eran.

—No.

—Cuéntame entonces cómo eran los tontorrones.

—Eran tipos que no tenían nada mejor que hacer —dijo su hermana sintiéndose autorizada a hablar al respecto—. Así que, adviértelo bien: tienes que trabajar o, al menos, hacer ver que trabajas, como hago yo. ¡Trabaja, trabaja y trabaja si quieres salvar el alma y el cuerpo! Es una necesidad, querido. Mira los Wilcox, mira los Pembroke. Con todos sus defectos de carácter y de mentalidad, los prefiero a otros mejor dotados. Y creo que los prefiero porque han trabajado con honradez y constancia.

—Ahórrame a los Wilcox —gimió Tibby.

—No pienso. Son gente como hay que ser.

—¡Por el amor de Dios, Meg! —protestó Tibby incorporándose súbitamente, alertado y furioso. Tibby, a pesar de sus defectos,

tenía auténtica personalidad.

—Pues bien, están tan cerca de lo que se debe ser como tú puedas imaginarte.

—No, no... oh, no.

—Estaba pensando en el hijo menor, al que una vez clasifiqué de tontorrón. Mira, volvió muy enfermo de Nigeria, pero se ha vuelto a ir, según me ha dicho Evie Wilcox..., ha vuelto a su deber.

La palabra «deber» siempre provocaba un gruñido.

—No persigue el dinero, sino el trabajo, aunque sea un trabajo brutal, en un país sombrío, con unos nativos bribones, en una lucha continua por el agua fresca y la comida. Una nación que produce hombres de esta clase puede sentirse orgullosa. No me extraña que Inglaterra haya llegado a ser un Imperio.

—¡Un Imperio!

—No hablo de los resultados —dijo Margaret con cierta tristeza —. Son demasiado complicados para mí. Yo sólo hablaba de los hombres. Me fastidian los Imperios, pero admiro el heroísmo que los ha edificado. Londres me fastidia, pero cuántos millares de personas admirables trabajan para hacer de Londres...

—Lo que es —concluyó Tibby con sarcasmo.

—Lo que es, sí, mala suerte. Quiero actividad sin civilización. ¡Qué paradoja! Y, sin embargo, espero que sea eso lo que encontremos en el paraíso.

—Yo, en cambio —dijo Tibby—, quiero civilización sin actividad, y eso espero encontrar en el otro sitio.

—No es preciso ir tan lejos, Tibby; si eso es lo que deseas, lo puedes encontrar en Oxford.

—Idiota.

—Si soy idiota, déjame volver al asunto de la casa. Si tú quieres, podemos vivir en Oxford... al norte de Oxford. Viviré en cualquier parte, excepto en Bournemouth, Torquay y Cheltenham. Desde luego, ni en Ilfracombe, ni en Swanage, ni en Tunbridge Wells, ni Surbiton, ni Bedford. Eso ni hablar.

—Entonces, en Londres.

—Por mi parte, no hay inconveniente, pero Helen prefiere irse fuera de Londres. De todas formas, no hay razón para que no tengamos una casa en el campo y un apartamento en Londres, con tal de que estemos juntos y contribuyamos todos. Aunque, bien pensado... ¡Dios mío, qué afán de protestar! ¡Y pensar que hay gente que no tiene dinero...! ¿Cómo viven? La inmovilización acabaría conmigo.

Mientras hablaba, la puerta se abrió de golpe y Helen irrumpió en la habitación en un estado de extrema excitación.

—¡Ay, queridos! ¿No sabéis lo que ha pasado? Nunca lo adivinaríais. Ha venido una mujer preguntando por su marido. *¿Su qué?* —a Helen le encantaba imitar su propia sorpresa—. Sí, por su marido, tal como suena.

—¿No tendrá nada que ver con Braknell? —preguntó Margaret que había tomado recientemente a un desempleado de este nombre para que limpiara la cubertería y las botas.

—Ya le ofrecí a Braknell, pero no lo quiso. Así que sólo podía ser Tibby. ¡No te asustes, Tibby! No era nadie conocido. Le dije: «Busque, buena mujer, dé una vuelta, rastree bajo las mesas, remueva la chimenea, sacuda los macasares. ¿Un marido?, ¿busca usted un marido?» Iba magníficamente vestida y relucía como un candelabro.

—Vamos, Helen, ¿qué ha pasado? De verdad.

—Lo que os digo. Estaba yo recitando mi discurso. Annie abre la puerta como una loca y aparece una mujer que se viene directamente hacia mí. Yo aún tenía la boca abierta. Entonces empezamos a hablar muy civilizadamente. «Quiero a mi marido, que tengo motivos para pensar que está aquí.» No, soy injusta. No dijo «que tengo motivos», sino «de quien tengo motivos». Lo dijo perfectamente. Así que le dije: «¿Su nombre, por favor?» y ella dijo: «Lan, señora», y así nos quedamos.

—¿Lan?

—Lan o Len. No controlábamos muy bien las vocales. Lanolina.

—¡Qué cosa más extraña!

—Le dije: «Mi querida mistress Lanolina, aquí hay una terrible confusión. A pesar de ser muy hermosa, mi recato es aún mayor

que mi hermosura y míster Lanolina jamás, jamás ha posado sus ojos en mí.» —Supongo que estarías encantada —dijo Tibby.

—Ya lo creo —chilló Helen—. Una experiencia de lo más delicioso. Mistress Lanolina es un cielo: buscaba a su marido como quien busca un paraguas. Lo perdió el sábado por la tarde y, durante unas horas, no se preocupó. Pero su intranquilidad fue en aumento por la noche y toda esta mañana. El desayuno no le pareció el mismo, ni la comida, así que se encaminó al número 2 de Wickham Place por considerarlo el lugar más idóneo para hallar el objeto perdido.

—Por qué demonios...

—No empieces con el «qué demonios». «Yo sé lo que sé», repetía ella sin grosería, pero con tristeza. En vano le pregunté lo que sabía. Unos saben lo que otros saben, y otros, no; y, si no lo saben, es mejor que tengan cuidado. ¡Pobre mujer, era tan incompetente! Tenía cara de gusano de seda y todo el comedor huele a raíces de lirio. Charlamos un rato sobre maridos y yo acabé preguntándome también dónde estaría el suyo. Le aconsejé que fuera a la policía. Me dio las gracias. Convinimos en que míster Lanolina era un pillín y que no hacía bien en irse de picos pardos. Pero creo que seguía sospechando de mí. Tengo que escribir a la tía Juley y contárselo. Recuerda, Meg, que tengo que escribirle.

—Tienes que escribirle —murmuró Meg dejando su trabajo—. No estoy segura de que sea muy divertido, Helen. Me da la impresión de que hay un trágico volcán latente en alguna parte, ¿no te parece?

—No, no lo creo. Ni creo que a ella le importase demasiado. Esa admirable criatura no tenía capacidad para la tragedia.

—Tal vez la tenga su marido —dijo Margaret dirigiéndose hacia la ventana.

—Qué va. Nadie con capacidad para la tragedia se habría casado con mistress Lanolina.

—¿Era guapa?

—Debió de tener buen tipo hace años.

Los apartamentos de enfrente, su único paisaje, colgaban como una cortina ricamente brocada entre Margaret y el oleaje de

Londres. Sus pensamientos se volvieron con tristeza hacia la búsqueda de una nueva casa. Wickham Place había sido un lugar seguro. Tuvo miedo, en su imaginación, al pensar en su pequeño rebaño avanzando hacia la barahúnda y la miseria, en contacto con episodios como el que acababa de ocurrir.

—Tibby y yo hemos estado pensando dónde iremos a vivir en septiembre —dijo por fin.

—Mejor sería que Tibby pensara primero qué quiere hacer —replicó Helen, y se reanudó la discusión, pero esta vez, con amargura. Llegó la hora del té. Finalizado éste, Helen volvió a preparar su discurso y Margaret empezó a preparar el suyo, porque ambas tenían que participar en una reunión de debate al día siguiente. Los pensamientos de Margaret, sin embargo, estaban envenenados. Mistress Lanolina había surgido del abismo, como un aroma sutil, como una pisada de duende, para mostrar una vida donde el amor y el odio están por igual en decadencia.

CAPÍTULO XIV

El misterio, como tantos otros misterios, se aclaró. Al día siguiente, cuando se estaban arreglando para salir a cenar, apareció un tal Bast. Era un empleado de la Compañía de Seguros contra Incendios Porphyrion. Así rezaba su tarjeta de visita. Venía «por lo de la señora de ayer». Eso dijo a Annie, que le había hecho pasar al comedor.

—¡Eh, chicos! —gritó Helen—. Es míster Lanolina.

Tibby estaba interesado. Los tres corrieron escaleras abajo y encontraron, no al tipo desenvuelto que esperaban, sino a un joven descolorido, de voz apagada y ojos tristes sobre un bigote caído, uno de esos rostros frecuentes en Londres, que recorren las calles de la ciudad como presencias acusadoras. Se podía adivinar en él la tercera generación, el nieto del pastor o del labriego atraído a Londres por la civilización, a una de los miles de personas que han perdido la vida del cuerpo y no han podido encontrar la vida del espíritu. Sobrevivían en él restos de robustez, atisbos de una primitiva prestancia. Margaret, advirtiendo la columna vertebral que podía haber sido recta y el pecho que podía haberse ensanchado, se preguntó si valía la pena renunciar a la vida animal a cambio de una levita y un par de ideas. La cultura le había resultado útil, pero en las últimas semanas Margaret dudaba de que esa misma cultura pudiera humanizar a la mayoría. Es ancho y largo el golfo que se extiende entre el hombre natural y el hombre filosófico, y son muchos los buenos chicos que se arruinan al intentar cruzarlo.

Conocía bien al tipo: las vagas aspiraciones, las trampas mentales, la familiaridad con las tapas de los libros. Sabía en qué

tono se dirigiría a ella. Pero se quedó perpleja al ver su propia tarjeta de visita.

—¿No recuerda habérmela dado, miss Schlegel? —dijo el joven con una violenta familiaridad.

—No, francamente, no lo recuerdo.

—Pues así fue, ¿sabe usted?

—¿Dónde nos conocimos, míster Bast? La verdad es que... en este preciso momento... no logro recordar.

—Fue en un concierto en el Queen's Hall. Seguro que se acordará —añadió pretenciosamente—, cuando le diga que daban la *Quinta sinfonía* de Beethoven.

—Vamos a oír la *Quinta* cada vez que la dan, así que sigo sin recordar. ¿Te acuerdas tú, Helen?

—¿Fue aquella vez que un gato se paseaba por la balaustrada?

Al joven le parecía que no.

—En ese caso, no recuerdo. Es el único concierto de Beethoven que recuerdo en concreto.

—Usted, si me permite decírselo, se llevó mi paraguas. Involuntariamente, por supuesto.

—Es muy probable —se rió Helen—, porque robo paraguas cada vez que oigo algo de Beethoven. ¿Lo recuperó usted?

—Sí, miss Schlegel, gracias...

—La confusión surgió a raíz de mi tarjeta, ¿verdad? —interrumpió Margaret.

—Sí, la confusión surgió... Fue una confusión.

—La señora que vino ayer pensó que usted vendría también y que podría encontrarle aquí, ¿no es eso? —continuó Margaret, tirándole de la lengua, pues, aunque el joven había prometido dar una explicación, parecía incapaz de hacerlo.

—Eso es... que yo también vendría. Una confusión.

—Entonces, ¿por qué...? —empezó a decir Helen; pero Margaret le puso la mano en el brazo.

—Le dije a mi mujer —continuó él rápidamente—... le dije a mistress Bast: «Tengo que visitar a unos amigos», y mistress Bast me dijo: «Bueno, ve.» Cuando me hube ido, me necesitó para un asunto importante y pensó que habría venido aquí, a causa de la tarjeta; por eso vino a buscarme. Así que les presento mis excusas y las de ella también, por las molestias que involuntariamente les haya podido causar.

—Ninguna molestia —dijo Helen—, pero sigo sin entender nada.

Un aire de evasión caracterizaba a míster Bast. Volvió a explicarlo todo, pero era evidente que mentía y Helen consideró que no debía irse de rositas. Helen tenía la crueldad propia de la juventud. Ignorando la presión de su hermana, dijo:

—Sigo sin entender. ¿Cuándo dijo usted que se iba de visita?

—¿De visita? ¿Qué visita? —dijo el joven mirando sorprendido, como si la pregunta no tuviera sentido, arma predilecta de los que nadan entre dos aguas.

—La visita que debía hacer usted por la tarde.

—¡Pues por la tarde, naturalmente! —replicó él y miró a Tibby para ver si la respuesta colaba. Pero Tibby se mostró poco amable y dijo:

—¿El sábado por la tarde o el domingo por la tarde?

—El... el sábado.

—¡Vaya! —dijo Helen—. Y estaba usted todavía de visita el domingo, cuando vino su mujer. ¡Qué visita más larga!

—Esto no es justo —protestó míster Bast volviéndose de color púrpura y adquiriendo una cierta belleza. Había un destello de lucha en sus ojos—. Ya veo lo que insinúa usted, pero se equivoca.

—Por Dios, no nos haga caso —dijo Margaret, inquieta otra vez por el olor que provenía del abismo.

—Era otra cosa —afirmó el joven dejando de lado sus modales estudiados—. No estuve donde usted piensa. ¡Ya lo creo que no!

—Ha sido usted muy amable al venir a darnos una explicación —dijo Margaret—. El resto, por supuesto, no nos concierne.

—Ya lo sé, pero yo quisiera... yo quería... ¿Han leído ustedes *La prueba de Richard Feverel?* [7]

Margaret dijo que sí.

—Es un libro precioso. Bueno, pues yo quería volver a la Naturaleza, ¿saben?, como hace Richard al final del libro. ¿Y han leído *El príncipe Otto*, de Stevenson?

Helen y Tibby asintieron con un amistoso gruñido.

—Es otro libro muy bonito. Leyéndolo, uno vuelve a la Naturaleza. Yo quería... —hablaba con voz afectada y, de pronto, a través de las brumas de su cultura, apareció un hecho desnudo; un hecho desnudo y redondo como un guijarro—. Estuve caminando todo el sábado por la noche —dijo Leonard—. Estuve caminando.

Un estremecimiento de aprobación recorrió a las dos hermanas. Pero la cultura se desbordó de nuevo y el joven les preguntó si habían leído *El gran camino*, de E. N. Lucas.

—Sin duda es otro libro muy bonito —dijo Helen—, pero yo preferiría que me hablase usted de su propio camino.

—Bueno, estuve paseando.

—¿Por dónde?

—No sé por dónde ni cuánto tiempo. Se hizo oscuro y no veía el reloj.

—¿Paseaba usted solo, si me permite la pregunta?

—Sí —dijo enderezándose—. Habíamos hablado mucho sobre esto en la oficina. Últimamente hemos hablado mucho de estas cosas en la oficina. Los compañeros decían que uno se guía por la Estrella Polar, y eso hice; me puse a mirar el atlas celeste. Pero apenas se sale uno de los lugares conocidos, todo resulta tan confuso que...

—No me hable de la Estrella Polar —interrumpió Helen, que empezaba a interesarse—. Ya sé de qué va. Da vueltas y vueltas y uno acaba dando vueltas a su alrededor.

—Eso es, la perdí por completo. Primero por culpa de las farolas; luego, de los árboles, y, al amanecer, porque estaba nublado.

Tibby, que prefería las mentiras sin desvelar, salió de la estancia. Sabía que aquel individuo jamás haría poesía y no quería escuchar sus intentos. Margaret y Helen se quedaron. La influencia de su hermano era mayor de lo que pensaban: en su ausencia, las dos hermanas se entusiasmaron con más facilidad.

—¿De dónde salió usted? —exclamó Margaret—. Cuéntenoslo.

—Tomé el metro hasta Wimbledon. Cuando salía de la oficina me dije: «Tengo que caminar y si no lo hago ahora, nunca lo haré.» Cené un poco en Wimbledon y luego...

—El campo no es muy bonito en aquella parte, ¿verdad?

—Había luces de gas en el camino, horas y horas. Pero yo tenía toda la noche por delante y el mero hecho de haber salido ya era algo grande. Me metí en el bosque.

—Sí, siga —dijo Helen.

—No se pueden imaginar lo difícil que se pone el terreno desnivelado cuando es oscuro.

—¿De verdad se salió usted de la carretera?

—Oh, sí. Siempre quise salir de las carreteras, pero lo malo es que luego resulta muy difícil encontrar el camino.

—Míster Bast, es usted un aventurero nato —rió Margaret—. Ningún alpinista profesional habría intentado lo que usted hizo. Es sorprendente que no terminase su paseo con la cabeza rota. ¿Qué dijo su mujer?

—Los alpinistas profesionales nunca van sin linternas y brújula —dijo Helen—. Además, no pueden andar: les cansa. Siga.

—Me sentí como R. L. S. [8] ¿Recuerdan *Virginibus*, cuando él...?

—Sí, pero háblenos del bosque. Estábamos en el bosque. ¿Cómo logró salir de él?

—Atravesé el bosque y encontré una carretera al otro lado, una carretera que ascendía por una colina. Me dio la impresión de que era uno de esos Downs del norte, porque la carretera volvió a descender, encontré césped y me metí en otro bosque. Era espantoso, lleno de matas de aliaga. Deseé no haber emprendido la excursión, pero, de pronto, empezó a clarear... justo cuando estaba

a punto de dejarme caer al pie de un árbol. Encontré otra carretera que llevaba a una estación y tomé el primer tren para Londres.

—¿Y el amanecer —preguntó Helen—, era hermoso?

Con inolvidable sinceridad el joven respondió:

—No.

La palabra voló como un nuevo canto rodado lanzado con honda. Todo cuanto pudiera haber de vulgar y literario en sus palabras se vino abajo. Abajo se fueron el sonsonete de R. L. S. y el «amor a la tierra», y su chistera de reflejos. En presencia de aquellas mujeres, Leonard se reafirmaba y hablaba con una fluidez y una exaltación que pocas veces había conocido.

—El amanecer era gris, nada digno de mención...

—Sí, como un gris atardecer al revés, ya entiendo.

—...y yo estaba demasiado cansado para levantar la cabeza y mirarlo, y helado también. Me alegro de haber hecho lo que hice y, sin embargo, en aquel momento me aburrí más de lo que ahora puedo expresar. Además, pueden creerme o no, como prefieran, estaba hambriento. Pensé que la cena que había hecho en Wimbledon me duraría toda la noche, como las cenas normales. Jamás imaginé que caminar influyera tanto. Vaya, cuando uno está caminando, como yo, tiene que desayunar, comer y merendar durante la noche, igual que si fuera de día, y yo no tenía en aquel momento más que un paquete de Woodbines. ¡Dios mío, qué mal me encontraba! Recordándolo, no fue lo que podríamos llamar un placer. Más bien fue un caso de tozudez. ¡Cielo santo! *¿De* qué sirve, díganme, de qué sirve vivir en una habitación para siempre jamás? Día tras día en el mismo sitio, haciendo lo mismo, yendo y viniendo del trabajo, hasta que uno se olvida de lo que ocurre fuera, aunque tampoco sea nada de particular.

—Creo que tenía usted que hacerlo —dijo Helen sentándose en el borde de la mesa.

El sonido de la voz femenina le sacó de su sinceridad y añadió:

—Lo curioso es que todo esto me vino a la cabeza leyendo una cosa de Richard Jeffries.

—Perdone, míster Bast, pero está usted en un error. Todo esto no le vino de donde usted supone, sino de un lugar más profundo.

Pero no pudo detenerle. Borrow siguió a Jeffries, Borrow, Thoreau y muchos más, R. L. S. cerraba la marcha y la carretera terminó en un piélago de libros. Que nadie vea en este comentario una falta de respeto hacia estas insignes personalidades. La falta es nuestra, no suya. Ellos intentan servirnos de señales indicadoras y no debe culpárseles si nosotros, por debilidad, confundimos las señales con el punto de llegada. Leonard había alcanzado el punto de llegada. Había visitado el campo de Surrey cuando la oscuridad ocultaba sus encantos y sus pueblecitos recoletos habían regresado a la noche primitiva. Este milagro tiene lugar cada doce horas, pero Leonard se había tomado la molestia de ir y comprobarlo por sí mismo. En su aletargada cabeza alentaba algo más grande que los libros de Jeffries: el espíritu que incitó a Jeffries a escribirlos. Aquel amanecer que no revelaba otra cosa que monotonía formaba parte de la eterna sonrisa que nos muestra George Borrow Stonehenge.

—Entonces, ¿no creen ustedes que hice el tonto? —preguntó volviendo a ser el ingenuo y bondadoso muchacho que la Naturaleza había querido que fuese.

—¡Cielo santo, no! —dijo Margaret.

—¡Dios nos libre de pensar semejante cosa! —contestó Helen.

—Me alegra que digan esto. Ya ven, mi mujer no lo entendería aunque se lo explicara mil veces.

—¡No, no, nada de tonterías! —gritó Helen con los ojos encendidos—. Usted ha hecho retroceder las fronteras; a mi modo de ver, es espléndido.

—No se ha contentado usted con soñar, como nosotras...

—Aunque también nosotras hemos paseado...

—Tenemos que enseñarle un cuadro que hay arriba...

Sonó el timbre de la puerta. El coche de punto había llegado para llevarlas a la fiesta.

—Date prisa, por no decir vuela... Había olvidado que hoy cenábamos fuera; pero vuelva, vuelva por aquí y hablaremos.

—Sí, no deje de hacerlo —repitió Margaret.

Leonard dijo con mucho sentimiento:

—No, no volveré. Es mejor así.

—¿Por qué es mejor? —preguntó Margaret.

—Es mejor no arriesgarse a una segunda entrevista. Siempre recordaré esta conversación como una de las cosas más hermosas de mi vida. De verdad. Se lo aseguro. No podemos repetirla. Me ha hecho mucho bien y será mejor que lo dejemos.

—La verdad, me parece un triste concepto de la vida.

—Las cosas se estropean con demasiada frecuencia.

—Ya lo sé —replicó vivamente Helen—, pero las personas no.

El joven no lo entendió. Continuó hablando y confundiendo la verdadera imaginación con la falsa. Lo que dijo no era erróneo, pero tampoco era cierto. Una nota falsa vibraba en sus palabras. Margaret y Helen sentían que con un ligero toque, aquel instrumento podría afinarse. Un débil tirón y quedaría mudo para siempre. El joven dio las gracias a las dos mujeres, pero insistió en que no volvería. Hubo un momento de torpeza y, por último, dijo Helen:

—Váyase; quizá sabe usted mejor que nosotras lo que conviene. Pero no olvide que es usted mejor que Jeffries.

El joven se fue. El coche de punto en que iban las dos hermanas lo alcanzó en la esquina, lo sobrepasó entre un agitar de manos y se desvaneció con su carga.

Londres encendía sus luces contra la noche. Las lámparas eléctricas siseaban tallando la penumbra en las calles principales; las luces de gas, en las calles secundarias, emitían su luz dorada y verdosa. El cielo era un purpúreo campo de batalla de la primavera, pero Londres no lo percibía. El humo mitigaba el esplendor y las nubes, a la altura de Oxford Street, formaban un techo delicadamente pintado que adornaba, pero no distraía. Londres nunca ha conocido los ejércitos triunfales del aire puro. Leonard se apresuraba por entre aquellas maravillas teñidas, formando parte del conjunto. La suya era una vida gris y para iluminarla había destinado unos rincones a la aventura. Las Schlegel —o, hablando con propiedad, su entrevista con ellas— iban a llenar esos rincones. No era la primera vez que hablaba íntimamente con extraños. La

costumbre se había desarrollado en él como una suerte de libertinaje, como una válvula de escape, la peor de todas: la válvula de escape de los instintos que no deben reprimirse. Esa costumbre le aterrorizaba, disolvía su recelo y su prudencia hasta el extremo de confiar sus secretos a personas que apenas si había visto. A la larga, le reportó muchos temores y algunos recuerdos agradables. Quizá la felicidad más profunda que nunca experimentara la encontró en un viaje que hizo a Cambridge en tren. Un estudiante de modales suaves había hablado con él. Entablaron conversación y poco a poco Leonard dejó de lado su reticencia, le contó algunos problemas domésticos e insinuó los restantes. El estudiante, creyendo que aquél podría ser el inicio de una amistad, le invitó a tomar café después de la cena, a lo que Leonard accedió, aunque luego, sintiéndose cada vez más tímido, no se movió del hotel comercial donde se alojaba. No quería que la Aventura chocase con la Prophyrion y menos aún con Jacky. Las personas de vida dichosa y colmada entenderán esta actitud con dificultad. Para las Schlegel, como para el estudiante, él era una criatura interesante, de la que deseaban saber más. Pero para él, ellos eran habitantes del país de la Aventura y debían mantenerse en el rincón que les había asignado; eran pinturas que no debían sobrepasar el límite de sus marcos.

El comportamiento seguido con la tarjeta de visita de Margaret era un típico ejemplo de su idiosincrasia. Su matrimonio no podía calificarse de trágico. Donde no hay dinero ni inclinación a la violencia no puede generarse la tragedia. No podía abandonar a su mujer y tampoco quería pegarle. El mal humor y la sordidez ya eran bastante. Entonces apareció «aquella tarjeta». Leonard, si bien furtivo, era desordenado y la dejó tirada por cualquier parte. Jacky la encontró y empezó: «¿Qué es esta tarjeta, Len? Dímelo.» «Ah, vaya, ¿te gustaría saber qué es esta tarjeta?» «Len, ¿quién es miss Schlegel?», etcétera. Pasaron los meses y la tarjeta, unas veces como broma, otras como agresión, paso de mano en mano, cada vez más sucia. Les siguió cuando se trasladaron de Camelia Road a Tulse Hill. La mostraron a terceros. Unos pocos centímetros de cartón se convirtieron en el campo de batalla donde combatían los corazones de Leonard y de su mujer. ¿Por qué no le dijo «Una dama se llevó mi paraguas, otra me dio esta tarjeta para que pudiera recuperarlo»? ¿Porque Jacky no le habría creído? En parte, pero

sobre todo, porque era un sentimental. Ningún afecto estaba ligado a la tarjeta, pero ésta simbolizaba la vida de la cultura, que Jacky no debía enturbiar. Por la noche, Leonard solía repetirse a sí mismo: «Bueno, en cualquier caso, ella no sabe nada de la tarjeta. ¡Toma, la fastidié!»

¡Pobre Jacky! No tenía mal fondo y sí mucho que soportar. Sacó su propia conclusión —sólo podía sacar una conclusión— y a su debido tiempo actuó en consecuencia. El viernes Leonard se emperró en no dirigirle la palabra y se pasó la noche observando las estrellas. El sábado se fue, como tenía por costumbre, a la ciudad, pero no regresó ni el sábado por la noche, ni el domingo por la mañana, ni el domingo por la tarde. La inquietud se hizo intolerable y, aunque Jacky tenía por entonces costumbres retraídas y era una mujer tímida, se dirigió a Wickham Place. Leonard regresó en su ausencia. La tarjeta, la fatídica tarjeta, había desaparecido de las páginas de Ruskin y adivinó lo que había ocurrido.

—Bien, bien —exclamó recibiendo a su mujer con grandes carcajadas—, yo sé dónde has estado, pero tú no sabes dónde he estado yo.

Jacky suspiró y dijo:

—Len, creo que podrías darme una explicación —y reemprendió las tareas domésticas.

Las explicaciones eran difíciles en la fase por la que atravesaban y Leonard era lo suficientemente tonto —estoy tentado de escribir: lo suficientemente sensato— como para no intentar darlas. Su reticencia no era ese falso artículo tan corriente en la vida de los negocios, esa reticencia que finge que una nonada es algo y se oculta tras el *Daily Telegraph.* El aventurero también es reticente y para un empleado es una aventura caminar unas horas en la oscuridad. Puede usted reírse de él, usted que ha dormido noches enteras en las sabanas africanas, con el rifle a su lado y rodeado de una intensa atmósfera de aventura. Y también puede reírse usted, que opina que las aventuras son una tontería. Pero no se sorprendan si Leonard se muestra tímido cuando se encuentre con ustedes, ni si las Schlegel, antes que Jacky, oyen hablar del amanecer.

Que las Schlegel no le hubiesen considerado un majadero se convirtió en una fuente de permanente alegría. Leonard se sentía dichoso cuando pensaba en ellas. La idea le mantenía a flote cuando caminaba hacia su casa, bajo un cielo que empalidecía. De algún modo las barreras de la riqueza habían caído y se había producido —no podía reducirlo a una frase— un consenso general ante la hermosura del mundo. «Mi convicción —dice el místico—, gana infinitamente en el momento en que otra alma la comparte» y ellas, las Schlegel, habían estado de acuerdo en que hay algo más allá de la vulgaridad cotidiana. Se quitó el sombrero de copa y lo cepilló cuidadosamente. Hasta aquel momento había pensado que lo desconocido eran los libros, la literatura, la conversación inteligente, la cultura. El ser humano podía elevarse sobre sí mismo y unirse al mundo por medio del estudio. Pero de aquel corto intercambio de opiniones surgía una nueva luz. ¿Sería ese «algo más» caminar en la oscuridad por las colinas suburbanas?

Descubrió que iba descubierto por Regent Street. Londres tomó cuerpo de golpe. Había poca gente a aquella hora, pero todos los que pasaban por su lado le miraban con hostilidad, con una hostilidad tanto más impresionante cuanto que era inconsciente. Se puso el sombrero. Era demasiado grande, su cabeza desaparecía en su interior como un pudín en una cacerola; las orejas se inclinaban hacia fuera al contacto con el ala curvada. Lo llevaba un poco echado hacia atrás y el efecto que producía era el de alargar la cara y evidenciar la distancia entre los ojos y el bigote. Así pertrechado escapaba a las críticas. Nadie se sintió incómodo mientras caminaba a saltitos por las aceras, con el corazón de un hombre latiendo rápidamente en su pecho.

CAPÍTULO XV

Las dos hermanas salieron a cenar henchidas de su aventura y, cuando ambas estaban poseídas de una misma idea, había pocas reuniones que se les resistieran. Aquella en concreto, por ser exclusivamente femenina, era más resistente que la mayoría de las reuniones, pero acabó por sucumbir tras una breve lucha. Helen en un extremo de la mesa y Margaret en el otro hablaron de míster Bast y sólo de míster Bast hasta que, mediado el primer plato, sus monólogos se derrumbaron, se desmenuzaron y pasaron a ser propiedad común. Y eso no fue todo. La reunión era, en realidad, un club de debates. Después de la cena se representaba una pieza que se leía en el salón, entre tazas de café y risas, pero que trataba con más o menos seriedad algún tema de interés general. Después de la pieza vino el debate y también en este debate figuró míster Bast, unas veces como punto insigne de la civilización y otras como punto oscuro, según el talante del interlocutor. El tema de la pieza era «¿Cómo debo disponer de mi dinero?» y en ella el lector decía ser un millonario en trance de muerte inclinado a legar su fortuna para la fundación de galerías de arte locales, pero abierto a dejarse convencer por otras iniciativas. Los papeles habían sido asignados de antemano y algunas intervenciones fueron divertidas. La anfitriona asumió el ingrato papel de «hijo primogénito del millonario» e imploraba a su agonizante pariente que no hiciese temblar los cimientos de la Sociedad permitiendo que tan vastas sumas de dinero salieran de las arcas familiares. El dinero era el fruto del sacrificio y la segunda generación tenía derecho a aprovecharse del sacrificio de la primera, pero ¿qué derecho tenía «míster Bast»? ¿No le bastaba con la National Gallery? Una vez la propiedad hubo expuesto sus razones —unas razones

necesariamente antipáticas— varios filántropos tomaron la palabra. Había que hacer algo por «míster Bast»: había que mejorar su condición sin debilitar su independencia; debía tener acceso a una biblioteca gratuita, a pistas de tenis gratuitas; había que pagar sus rentas de tal modo que el interesado no supiera que se le pagaban; tenía que unirse a los Territoriales; debía ser enérgicamente separado de su deprimente esposa y darle a ella el dinero en compensación; habría que asignársele un ángel de la guarda, un miembro de la clase ociosa que le vigilara sin cesar (gruñidos de Helen); había que darle comida, pero no ropas; ropas, pero no comida; un billete de ida y vuelta, en tercera, a Venecia, y una vez allí, no darle ni comida ni ropas. En resumen, podía dársele cualquier cosa o todas a la vez, menos el dinero.

Y al llegar a este punto intervino Margaret.

—¡Orden, orden, miss Schlegel! —dijo la protagonista—. Usted está aquí, según creo, para aconsejarme en interés de la Sociedad para la Conservación de los Lugares Históricos o la Belleza Natural. No puede usted salirse de su papel. Hace usted que me dé vueltas la cabeza y me parece que olvida mi delicado estado de salud.

—Su cabeza no daría vueltas si escuchase mis argumentos —dijo Margaret—. ¿Por qué no darle el dinero directamente? Es usted propietaria de treinta mil libras anuales.

—¿De veras? Yo creía que era un millón.

—¿Un millón no era el capital? ¡Madre mía! Teníamos que haber dejado claro este extremo al principio. En fin, no importa. Tenga usted lo que tenga, yo le ordeno que entregue tres mil libras al año a tantos pobres como pueda.

—¡Pero esto los convertiría en mendigos! —dijo una chica juiciosa a quien le gustaban las Schlegel, aunque las consideraba un poco materialistas en ciertas ocasiones.

—No si les dan mucho. Un buen golpe de fortuna no convierte a nadie en mendigo. Los pequeños donativos, distribuidos entre muchos son los que hacen daño. El dinero es educativo. Es mucho más educativo que las cosas que pueden adquirirse con él —hubo protestas—. En cierto sentido, claro —pero las protestas no remitían —. Bueno, ¿hay algo más civilizado que un hombre que sepa administrar sabiamente sus ganancias?

—Que es, exactamente, lo que no haría míster Bast.

—Denle una oportunidad. Denle el dinero. No le hagan donativos de libros de poesía y billetes de tren como si fuera un niño. Denle con qué comprar esas cosas. Cuando el socialismo se realice las cosas serán distintas y tal vez se piense en términos de bienes en lugar de pensar en dinero en efectivo. Pero hasta que esto no suceda, den dinero a la gente, porque el dinero es el alma de la civilización, sea cual sea el cuerpo. La imaginación debería trabajar sobre el dinero y comprenderlo bien, porque es... porque es la segunda cosa más importante del mundo. Y está tan oculto, tan guardado, hay tan pocas ideas claras al respecto... oh, sí, claro, está la economía política, por supuesto; pero somos muy pocos los que tenemos conciencia clara de nuestros propios ingresos y muy pocos los que admitimos que las ideas independientes son fruto, en nueve casos de cada diez, de unos medios de vida independientes. ¡Dinero! Den dinero a míster Bast y no se preocupen de sus ideales. Ya los encontrará por sí mismo.

Se dejó caer hacia atrás en su asiento mientras los miembros más circunspectos del club empezaban a formarse una idea incorrecta de ella. La mente femenina, si bien es práctica hasta la crueldad en los asuntos cotidianos, no soporta que se minimicen los ideales en una conversación, así que le preguntaron a miss Schlegel cómo podía decir semejantes cosas y de qué le serviría a míster Bast ganar el mundo si perdía su alma. Margaret respondió que no le serviría de nada, pero que no salvaría su alma hasta que no hubiera ganado un poco de mundo. Entonces las demás dijeron que no, que no lo creían así y ella admitió que un oficinista sobrecargado de trabajo podía salvar su alma en un sentido supraterrenal, donde el esfuerzo equivale al mérito, pero negó que tal persona fuera capaz de explorar las fuentes espirituales de este mundo y aseguró que jamás conocería los raros goces del cuerpo ni lograría una relación clara y apasionada con sus semejantes. Las demás habían atacado las instituciones de una sociedad basada en la Propiedad, el Interés y cosas similares; ella, Margaret, sólo fijaba sus ojos en unos pocos seres humanos para ver cómo, en las condiciones presentes, podía hacérseles más felices. Hacer el bien a la humanidad era inútil: esfuerzos de todos los colores repartidos por vastas áreas habían dado como resultado un gris universal.

Hacer el bien a uno o, como en este caso, a unos pocos, era lo máximo que se atrevía a esperar.

Entre las idealistas y las economistas políticas, Margaret pasó un mal rato. Sin estar de acuerdo en nada, todas coincidieron en rechazar las razones de Margaret y en conservar en sus manos la administración del dinero del millonario. La chica juiciosa presentó un esquema de «supervisión personal y mutua ayuda», cuyos efectos consistían en convertir a las personas pobres en personas menos pobres. La anfitriona hizo constar con persistencia que ella, como hijo primogénito, podría sin duda ocupar un lugar entre los legatarios del millonario. Margaret admitió débilmente esta reclamación y al instante se presentó otra reclamación procedente de Helen quien declaró haber servido como ama de llaves del millonario durante cuarenta años, agobiada de trabajo y mal pagada, ¿no se haría nada por ella, tan pobre y tan rechoncha? Por fin, el millonario leyó su testamento por el cual dejaba toda su fortuna al Ministerio de Hacienda y se murió. La parte seria de la discusión había sido más interesante que la parte destinada a la ficción —¿no sucede generalmente lo contrario en un debate entre hombres?—, pero, en todo caso, la reunión se disolvió alegremente y una docena de mujeres felices se dispersó en dirección a sus respectivos hogares.

Helen y Margaret acompañaron a la chica juiciosa hasta la estación de Battersea Bridge discutiendo por el camino. Cuando la chica juiciosa se fue, las dos hermanas sintieron un profundo alivio y adquirieron conciencia de la hermosura de la noche. Los faroles y los plátanos, alineados junto al muelle, tenían un tono de dignidad poco común en las ciudades inglesas. Los bancos estaban casi desiertos. Sólo algunas personas vestidas con trajes de noche habían salido de sus casas próximas al muelle para gozar del aire fresco y del rumor de la marea ascendente. Hay algo continental en el Chelsea Embankment. Es un espacio abierto correctamente utilizado, una bendición más frecuente en Alemania que aquí. Cuando Margaret y Helen se sentaron, la ciudad a sus pies parecía un vasto teatro, un teatro de ópera en el que se representaba una inacabable trilogía; y ellas, un par de orondas abonadas a quienes no importaba perderse un trozo del segundo acto.

—¿Tienes frío?

—No.

—¿Cansada?

—No importa.

El tren de la chica juiciosa pasó retumbando sobre el puente.

—Oye, Helen...

—¿Sí?

—¿Vamos a seguir con míster Bast?

—No sé.

—Creo que no deberíamos.

—Como prefieras.

—No vale la pena, me parece, a menos que de verdad te interese conocer gente nueva. La discusión me hizo pensar en ello. Nos fue muy bien con él en aquel estado de excitación, pero piensa lo que sería una relación racional. No debemos jugar con la amistad. Es mejor que no.

—Además, está el asunto de mistress Lanolina —bostezó Helen —, tan aburrida, la pobre.

—Justo. Y probablemente, peor que aburrida.

—Me gustaría saber cómo consiguió él tu tarjeta.

—Bueno, dijo algo sobre un concierto y un paraguas.

—Entonces la tarjeta vio a la mujer...

—Helen, vámonos a la cama.

—No, espera un poco, es tan bonito... Dime, ah, sí, dime una cosa, ¿tú dijiste que el dinero es el alma del mundo?

—Sí.

—Entonces, ¿qué es el cuerpo?

—Lo que uno elige, en gran parte —dijo Margaret—. Algo que no es el dinero. No puedo decirte más.

—¿Pasear por la noche?

—Es posible.

—¿Oxford, en el caso de Tibby?

—Así parece.

—¿Y para ti?

—Ahora que tenemos que abandonar Wickham Place, empiezo a pensar que es eso. Para mistress Wilcox era Howards End.

El nombre de uno recorre enormes distancias. Míster Wilcox, que estaba sentado con unos amigos muchos bancos más allá, oyó el suyo, se puso en pie y se encaminó hacia las dos hermanas.

—Es triste pensar que los lugares pueden ser más importantes que las personas —continuó Margaret.

—¿Por qué, Meg? Por lo general son mucho más agradables. Yo prefiero pensar en la casita del bosque de Pomerania que en el gordo herr Förstmeister que vivía en ella.

—Creo que llegaremos a preocuparnos cada vez menos de la gente, Helen. Cuanta más gente se conoce, tanto más fácil resulta sustituir a las personas. Es una de las maldiciones de Londres. Espero terminar mi vida preocupándome más por un lugar...

En este punto las alcanzó míster Wilcox. Hacía varias semanas que no le habían visto.

—¿Qué tal están? —dijo él—. Creí reconocer sus voces. ¿Qué están haciendo por estos barrios?

Su tono de voz era protector. Daba a entender que una dama no debe sentarse en el Chelsea Embankment sin escolta masculina. Helen se molestó, pero Margaret lo aceptó como parte integrante de la personalidad del hombre.

—Hace un siglo que no le veíamos, míster Wilcox. Encontré a Evie hace poco en el metro. Espero que tendrán buenas noticias de su hijo.

—¿De Paul? —dijo míster Wilcox apagando su cigarrillo y sentándose entre las dos—. Sí, Paul está muy bien. Recibimos una carta suya desde Madeira. Por estas fechas ya debe de estar trabajando de nuevo.

—¡Uf! —exclamó Helen, tiritando por causas complejas.

—¿Decía usted?

—¿No es demasiado malo el clima de Nigeria?

—Alguien tiene que ir —dijo él con simplicidad—. Inglaterra no conservará su comercio con ultramar si no está dispuesta a hacer sacrificios. A menos que nos hagamos fuertes en África Occidental, Ale... pueden surgir complicaciones. Y ahora, cuéntenme cosas de ustedes.

—Oh, hemos pasado una noche estupenda —dijo Helen, que siempre se despertaba ante la llegada de un visitante—. Pertenecemos a una especie de club que lee piezas teatrales. Margaret y yo y... todo mujeres. Después hay una discusión. Esta noche trataba de cómo debe uno dejar su dinero, si a la familia o a los pobres; y si es a los pobres, cómo... Oh, muy interesante.

El hombre de negocios sonrió. Desde la muerte de su esposa había duplicado su capital. Era, por fin, una figura importante, un nombre que daba seguridad a los prospectos financieros en los que aparecía. La vida le había tratado bien. El mundo parecía estar a su alcance mientras escuchaba el rumor del Támesis, que aún discurría tierra adentro desde el mar. Este fenómeno, tan maravilloso para las dos hermanas, no encerraba secretos para él. Él había contribuido a acortar la marea adquiriendo acciones de la esclusa de Teddington y, si él y otros capitalistas lo juzgaban conveniente, la marea se acortaría más aún el día menos pensado. Después de una buena cena y con una mujer cordial pero académica a cada lado, sentía en sus manos todas las riendas de la vida y creía que lo que él ignoraba no merecía la pena de saberse.

—¡Me parece una diversión la mar de original! —exclamó con su risa característica y agradable—. Me gustaría que Evie asistiese a esa clase de reuniones. Pero no tiene tiempo. Le ha dado por criar *terriers* de Aberdeen, unos perritos monísimos.

—Me parece que sería mejor que nosotras hiciéramos lo mismo.

—Nosotras creemos que nos sirve de algo, ¿sabe? —dijo Helen un tanto secamente, porque el encanto de míster Wilcox era de los que no causa efecto dos veces y Helen tenía amargos recuerdos de los días en que una opinión como la que acababa de manifestar le impresionaba favorablemente—. Nos parece una buena cosa perder una noche cada quince días en un debate, aunque, como dice mi hermana, quizá sea mejor criar perros.

—De ningún modo. No estoy de acuerdo con su hermana. No hay como un debate para adquirir rapidez. A menudo lamento no haber participado en debates cuando era joven. Eso me habría ayudado una barbaridad.

—¿Rapidez?

—Sí, rapidez en la réplica. Muchas veces he dejado escapar una oportunidad porque otro tenía el don de la palabra y yo no. Sí, sí, tengo mucha fe en esas discusiones.

Margaret pensó que el tono paternal sentaba bien a un hombre que podía ser un padre por la edad. Siempre había sostenido que míster Wilcox poseía un cierto encanto. En los momentos de dolor o de emoción su ineptitud le resultaba dolorosa, pero era agradable oírle en momentos como aquel, contemplar su espeso bigote castaño y su frente ancha, erguida contra las estrellas. Helen, en cambio, se sentía incómoda. Para ella, el objetivo de los debates era la Verdad.

—Por supuesto, el tema no tiene demasiada importancia —dijo él.

Margaret se echó a reír y dijo:

—Esto lleva trazas de ser mejor que el propio debate.

Helen se recobró y también se echó a reír.

—No, no voy a seguir —declaró—. Sólo someteré nuestro caso concreto a míster Wilcox.

—¿Acerca de míster Bast? Sí, hazlo. Será más indulgente con un caso concreto.

—Encienda antes otro cigarrillo, míster Wilcox, por favor. El asunto en cuestión es éste: acabamos de conocer a un joven muy pobre que muestra interés...

—¿Qué profesión tiene?

—Oficinista.

—¿Dónde?

—¿Te acuerdas tú, Margaret?

—En la Porphyrion, una compañía de seguros contra incendio.

—Ah, sí, aquella gente tan simpática que le dio a la tía Juley una alfombra nueva para la chimenea. Bien, el joven parece interesante en algunos aspectos, muy interesante; y desearíamos ayudarle. Está casado con una mujer a la que no parece querer mucho. Le gustan los libros y lo que podríamos llamar, más o menos, la aventura. Si tuviera una oportunidad... pero es muy pobre. Todo el dinero se le va en ropa y otras tonterías. Es de temer que las circunstancias sean demasiado decisivas en su caso y que acabe hundiéndose. Bueno, la cuestión es que el caso se mezcló con nuestro debate. No era el tema, pero éste parecía concernirle. Suponga que un millonario está a punto de morir y desea dejar su dinero para ayudar a este hombre. ¿Cómo habría que ayudarle? ¿Dándole tres mil libras al año directamente, como sugería Margaret? Muchas pensaron que esto le convertiría en un mendigo. ¿Proporcionarle bibliotecas gratuitas a él y a los que son como él? Yo digo, ¡no! No necesita leer más libros, sino leerlos mejor. Mi sugerencia era que habría que pagarle cada año unas vacaciones de verano, pero entonces estaba el problema de su mujer. Las demás decían que su mujer también tendría que ir con él. No encontrábamos una solución que nos pareciera satisfactoria. ¿Qué opina usted? Imagínese que fuera usted millonario y quisiera ayudar a los pobres, ¿qué haría?

Míster Wilcox, cuya fortuna no era muy inferior a la indicada, se rió de un modo exuberante.

—Mi querida miss Schlegel, yo no me aventuraría donde las de su sexo han sido incapaces de entrar. Yo no añadiría otro plan a los numerosos y excelentes planes que ya se han sugerido. Mi única contribución es ésta: hagan que su amigo deje la Porphyrion lo antes posible.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó Margaret.

El hombre bajó la voz.

—Que esto quede entre amigos: la compañía hará suspensión de pagos antes de Navidad. Se irá al agua —añadió pensando que no le habrían entendido.

—¡Dios mío, Helen! ¿Has oído esto? ¡Tendrá que buscar otro trabajo!

—¿Tendrá? Oh, no, háganle abandonar el barco antes de que se hunda. Que consiga un nuevo trabajo ahora.

—¿Mejor eso que esperar hasta estar seguro?

—Decididamente.

—¿Y eso por qué?

De nuevo la carcajada olímpica. Bajó más la voz.

—Por ley natural, el hombre que busca empleo y ya tiene colocación consigue algo mejor, está en una posición más fuerte que el hombre que no la tiene. Da la impresión de que vale algo.

Lo sé por mí mismo, y con esto les confío un secreto de Estado, es algo que impresiona mucho a los empresarios. Me temo que es connatural a la naturaleza humana.

—Nunca lo hubiera pensado —murmuró Margaret mientras Helen decía:

—Nuestra naturaleza parece ser justamente lo contrario. Nosotras empleamos a la gente porque está desempleada. Como el limpiabotas, por ejemplo.

—¿Y cómo limpia las botas?

—Mal —confesó Margaret.

—Ahí lo tiene.

—¿Entonces usted nos aconseja que le digamos a ese joven...?

—Yo no aconsejo nada —interrumpió el hombre mirando arriba y abajo del muelle, no fuera a ser que alguien hubiera oído su indiscreción—. No debí haber hablado... pero ha dado la casualidad de que lo sabía, puesto que estoy entre bastidores. La Porphyrion es un mal asunto. En fin, no digan que yo se lo he dicho. Ha quedado fuera del grupo.

—Por supuesto que no diré nada. A decir verdad, no sé siquiera lo que eso significa.

—Yo creía que una compañía de seguros no se iba nunca al agua —contribuyó Helen—. ¿Las otras no la amparan y la salvan?

—Usted se refiere al reaseguro —dijo míster Wilcox suavemente —. Y ésa es la razón de la debilidad de la Porphyrion. Ha querido jugar sucio, se ha tenido que enfrentar con una serie de pequeños

incendios y no ha podido reasegurar. Me temo que las sociedades anónimas no se salvan las unas a las otras por amor.

—«La naturaleza humana», supongo —citó Helen, y él se rió y estuvo de acuerdo en que así era. Cuando Margaret dijo que ella suponía que los oficinistas, como todo el mundo, tenían muchas dificultades en encontrar trabajo estos días, él replicó:

—Sí, muchísimas —y se levantó para reunirse con sus amigos. Lo sabía por su propia oficina: raramente un puesto vacante y cientos de solicitudes para ese puesto. En aquel momento, ni un sólo puesto libre.

—¿Y cómo anda Howards End? —dijo Margaret deseosa de cambiar de tema antes de que se separasen. Míster Wilcox podía pensar que intentaban sacar algo de él.

—Lo hemos dejado.

—¿De veras? ¿Y está usted paseando sin hogar por el melenudo Chelsea? [9] ¡Qué extraños resultan los caminos del destino!

—No, quise decir que lo hemos dejado abandonado. Nos hemos mudado.

—¿Por qué? Yo les hacía anclados allá para siempre. Evie no me dijo nada.

—Me parece que cuando encontró usted a Evie aún no estaba decidida la cosa. Sólo hace una semana que nos trasladamos. A Paul le gusta aquel viejo lugar y lo mantenemos para que pase allí sus vacaciones; pero la verdad es que resulta demasiado pequeño. No recuerdo si usted llegó a estar allí.

—En la casa, nunca.

—Bueno, Howards End es una de esas granjas arregladas que nunca acaban de ir bien, se gaste lo que se gaste en ellas. Nos enredamos con un garaje en mitad de las raíces del olmo, y el año pasado cercamos un trozo de prado e intentamos hacer un porche. Evie se aficionó a las plantas alpinas. Pero no fue bien... no, no fue bien. Usted recordará o mejor dicho, su hermana recordará la granja, con aquellos pavos abominables y aquel seto que la pobre mujer nunca lograba cortar en línea recta y que se estrechaba al final. Y dentro de la casa, las vigas y la escalera, tras una puerta... Es muy pintoresco, sí, pero no es un sitio para vivir —miró por

encima del parapeto alegremente—. Marea alta. Por otra parte, la situación de la casa tampoco era buena. El vecindario se iba volviendo suburbial. O en Londres o fuera de Londres, digo yo; así que tomamos una casa en Ducie Street, cerca de Sloane Street, y otra en Shropshire: Oniton Grange. ¿No han oído hablar nunca de Oniton? Vengan a vernos... está lejos de cualquier parte, camino de Gales.

—¡Cuántos cambios! —dijo Margaret. Pero el cambio estaba en su propia voz que se había vuelto extremadamente triste—. No puedo imaginarme Howards End o Hilton sin ustedes.

—Hilton no se ha quedado sin nosotros —respondió él—. Charles está aún ahí.

—¿Aún? —dijo Margaret, que no había mantenido contacto con la familia de Charles—. Yo le hacía en Epsom. Lo estaban amueblando esa Navidad... una Navidad. ¡Cómo cambia todo! Yo solía admirar a la esposa de Charles desde nuestras ventanas, a menudo. ¿No era en Epsom?

—Sí, pero se mudaron hace dieciocho meses. Charles, que es un buen chico —su voz se hizo tenue—, pensó que yo estaría muy solo. Yo no quería que se mudase, pero lo hizo: tomó una casa al otro extremo de Hilton, cerca de los Seis Túmulos. Tenía un coche. Y allí están todos, un buen grupo: él, ella y los dos nietecitos.

—Yo arreglo los asuntos de los demás mejor que ellos mismos —dijo Margaret mientras se daban la mano—. Cuando usted se fue de Howards End yo habría metido allí a Charles Wilcox. Un lugar como aquél no debería salir de la familia.

—Y así es —contestó él—. Ni lo hemos vendido ni pienso venderlo.

—No, pero no lo habita ninguno de ustedes.

—Bueno, tenemos un estupendo guardián: Hamar Bryce, un enfermo. Si alguna vez Charles lo quisiera... pero no lo querrá. Dolly no puede vivir sin las comodidades modernas. No, todos nos hemos pronunciado contra Howards End. Nos gusta, en cierto sentido, pero consideramos que no es ni una cosa ni otra. Y hay que tener una cosa u otra.

—Y algunas personas son lo bastante afortunadas como para tener las dos cosas a la vez. Se apaña usted admirablemente, míster Wilcox. Mi enhorabuena.

—Y la mía —dijo Helen.

—Dígale a Evie que venga a vernos... a las dos, a Wickham Place. Aunque no vamos a estar allí mucho tiempo.

—¿Cómo? ¿También ustedes están de mudanza?

—En septiembre —suspiró Margaret.

—¡Vaya, todo el mundo se muda! Adiós.

La marea había empezado a bajar. Margaret se inclinó sobre la balaustrada y contempló el espectáculo con tristeza. Míster Wilcox había olvidado a su mujer; Helen, su amor; ella misma estaba olvidando probablemente. Todo el mundo de mudanza. ¿Vale la pena esforzarse en el pasado cuando hay un flujo continuo incluso en el corazón de las personas?

Helen la hizo volver en sí diciendo:

—¡Hay que ver qué ricachón y qué vulgar se ha vuelto míster Wilcox! Ya no vale un pimiento, ¿no crees? Pero, mira, nos informó de lo de la Porphyrion. Escribiremos a míster Bast en cuanto lleguemos a casa y le diremos que la deje inmediatamente.

—Sí, vale la pena hacerlo. Vamos.

—Invitémosle a tomar el té.

CAPÍTULO XVI

Leonard aceptó la invitación el sábado siguiente. Pero había estado en lo cierto: la visita resultó un perfecto fracaso.

—¿Azúcar? —dijo Margaret.

—¿Pastel? —dijo Helen—. ¿La tarta grande o los pastelillos? Temo que encontrase usted mi carta un poco rara, pero ya le explicaremos... en realidad, no somos raras, ni afectadas, de veras. Sólo un poco... exageradas, eso es todo.

Como perro faldero, Leonard no era brillante. No era un italiano y mucho menos un francés, por cuya sangre corre el espíritu de la insinuación y la réplica; su ingenio era el ingenio Cockney, no abría puertas a la imaginación, y Helen se quedó cortada por un «Cuanto más hable una mujer, mejor», administrado juguetonamente.

—Ah, sí —dijo ella.

—Las mujeres brillan...

—Sí, ya sé: las mujeres son rayos de sol. Le daré una bandeja.

—¿Le gusta a usted su trabajo? —interrumpió Margaret.

Leonard, a su vez, se quedó cortado. No estaba dispuesto a permitir que aquellas mujeres metieran las narices en su trabajo. Ellas eran el Romance, como la habitación en la que por fin había entrado, con curiosas escenas de personas bañándose en las paredes, como las mismas tazas de té, con sus delicados bordes de frambuesas. Pero no estaba dispuesto a permitir que el Romance se interfiriese en su vida. Cuando esto ocurre, interviene el diablo.

—Oh, bastante, sí —respondió.

—¿Su empresa es la Porphyrion, verdad?

—Sí, en efecto... —bastante ofendido—. Es curioso cómo se saben las cosas.

—¿Por qué curioso? —preguntó Helen que no había entendido el alcance de sus pensamientos—. Lo pone a todo lo largo de su tarjeta, y teniendo en cuenta que le escribimos allí y que usted respondió en un papel con membrete...

—¿Cree usted que la Porphyrion es una gran compañía de seguros? —continuó Margaret.

—Depende de lo que usted considere grande.

—Quiero decir una empresa sólida, estable, que ofrezca un porvenir razonablemente brillante a sus empleados.

—No podría decirle... Unos le dirán una cosa y otros otra —dijo el empleado, incómodo—. Por mi parte —meneó la cabeza—, sólo creo la mitad de lo que oigo. No, ni siquiera eso, es más seguro. He advertido que los más listos son los que más se equivocan. Sí, nunca se es bastante cuidadoso.

Bebió y se secó el bigote, que resultó ser uno de esos bigotes que siempre se meten en las tazas de té, que dan más molestias de lo que valen y que no están ni siquiera de moda.

—Estoy de acuerdo con usted, y por eso tenía curiosidad. ¿Es una empresa sólida y estable?

Leonard no tenía la menor idea. Sabía lo que se refería a su máquina de escribir y nada más. No deseaba confesar ignorancia ni conocimiento y, en estas circunstancias, otro movimiento de cabeza le pareció lo más adecuado. Para él, como para el público inglés, la Prophyrion era la Porphyrion de los anuncios: un gigante al estilo clásico, pero decentemente vestido, que sostenía en una mano una antorcha encendida y señalaba con la otra hacia Saint Paul y Windsor Castle. Debajo figuraba escrita una elevada suma de dinero y cada cual podía sacar sus propias conclusiones. El gigante hacía que Leonard realizase operaciones aritméticas, que escribiese cartas y que explicase las reglas a los nuevos clientes o que las volviese a explicar a los viejos. Los gigantes, ya se sabe, tienen una moralidad impulsiva. Éste en particular, pagaba con ostentosa rapidez una alfombra para la chimenea de mistress Munt y denegaba con lentitud una reclamación importante, por la que luchaba de tribunal

en tribunal. Pero sus verdaderas luchas, sus antecedentes, sus amores con otros miembros del Panteón, todo eso quedaba tan lejos del alcance de los simples mortales como las escapadas galantes de Zeus. Mientras los dioses son poderosos, poco sabemos acerca de ellos. Sólo en los días de su decadencia entra la luz en los cielos.

—Nos han dicho que la Porphyrion no tiene empuje —estalló Helen—. Queríamos contárselo. Por eso le escribimos.

—Un amigo nuestro cree que está insuficientemente reasegurada —dijo Margaret.

Ahora Leonard tenía su clave: debía ensalzar a la Porphyrion.

—Pueden decirle a su amigo —dijo— que está equivocado.

—Ah, bueno.

El joven enrojeció ligeramente. En su círculo, equivocarse era fatal. A las Schlegel, en cambio, no les importaba haberse equivocado, estaban realmente contentas de haber sido mal informadas. Para ellas nada era irremediable, excepto el mal.

—Equivocado, por así decirlo —añadió.

—¿Cómo «por así decirlo»?

—Quiero decir que yo no diría que está absolutamente en lo cierto.

Había dado un paso en falso.

—Entonces acierta en parte —dijo la mayor de las dos mujeres con la rapidez con que se enciende una luz.

Leonard replicó que todo el mundo está en lo cierto en parte, si es a lo que iban.

—Míster Bast, yo no entiendo de negocios y me atrevo a decir que mis preguntas son estúpidas, pero ¿puede usted decirme cuál es la diferencia entre una empresa que va bien y una que va mal?

Leonard se recostó en su asiento con un suspiro.

—Nuestro amigo, que también es un hombre de negocios, fue concluyente al respecto. Dijo que antes de Navidad...

—Y le aconsejaba a usted que se despidiese —terminó Helen—. Pero no veo por qué habría de saberlo él mejor que usted.

Leonard se frotó las manos. Estaba tentado de decir que no sabía nada en absoluto de aquel asunto. Pero su educación comercial era demasiado fuerte. No podía decir que era un mal asunto, porque eso habría sido renunciar; no podía decir que era un buen asunto, porque habría sido renunciar igualmente. Intentó decir que era algo equidistante de ambos extremos, con amplias posibilidades en las dos direcciones, pero se hundió ante la mirada de cuatro ojos sinceros. Y, sin embargo, apenas lograba establecer distingos entre las dos hermanas. Una era más hermosa y más vivaz, pero «las Schlegel» seguían siendo un complejo dios hindú, cuyos brazos ondulantes y contradictorios discursos eran producto de una sola cabeza.

—Sólo hay una cosa cierta —recalcó—: que «las cosas pasan», como dijo Ibsen.

Estaba rabiando por hablar de libros y sacar el máximo partido de su hora romántica. Los minutos transcurrían mientras las dos mujeres, con imperfecta habilidad, discutían el tema del reaseguro o ensalzaban a su anónimo amigo. Leonard empezó a molestarse, quizá con razón. Hizo vagas alusiones a esas personas, entre las que él no se contaba, que se sienten molestas cuando los demás discuten sus asuntos, pero ellas no entendieron la indirecta. Un hombre habría mostrado más tacto. Las mujeres, muy diplomáticas en ciertos aspectos, son muy obtusas en este terreno. No comprenden por qué ocultamos nuestras ganancias y nuestras expectativas bajo un tupido velo. «¿Cuánto tiene usted y cuánto espera usted tener el próximo mes de junio?» Las Schlegel sostenían la teoría de que la reticencia en asuntos monetarios era absurda y de que la vida sería más auténtica si cada uno dijera la medida exacta de la isla de oro sobre la que se asienta, el tamaño exacto del alma sobre la que vive el cuerpo, o sea, lo que no es dinero. De otro modo, ¿cómo puede uno enjuiciar el modelo?

Y los minutos preciosos transcurrían y Jacky y la miseria se aproximaban cada vez más. Al final ya no pudo resistirlo y explotó, recitando febrilmente nombres de libros. Hubo un momento de intensa alegría cuando Margaret dijo: «Así que a usted le gusta Carlyle», y entonces se abrió la puerta y entraron «míster y miss Wilcox» precedidos de dos cachorrillos saltarines.

—¡Oh, qué ricos! ¡Evie, qué cosa más mona! —chilló Helen cayendo a cuatro patas.

—Trajimos a estos amiguitos —dijo míster Wilcox.

—Los crío yo misma.

—¡De veras! Míster Bast, venga y juegue con estos cachorrillos.

—Tengo que irme ya —dijo Leonard amargamente.

—Pero juegue antes un rato con estos cachorrillos.

—Éste es *Achab* y ésta es *Jezabel* —dijo Evie, que era de las que ponen a los animales los nombres de los personajes menos afortunados del Antiguo Testamento.

—Me tengo que ir.

Helen estaba demasiado ocupada con los cachorrillos para advertir su presencia.

—Míster Wilcox, míster Ba... ¿se va usted ya, de veras? Bueno, adiós.

—Vuelva a visitarnos —dijo Helen desde el suelo.

Entonces la ira de Leonard se desbordó. ¿Por qué había de volver? ¿De qué serviría? Dijo rotundamente:

—No, no volveré: sería un fracaso.

Cualquier persona le habría dejado marchar. «Fue una equivocación. Intentamos conocer gente de otra clase: imposible.» Pero las Schlegel no habían jugado nunca con la realidad de la vida. Habían intentado entablar una amistad y estaban dispuestas a arrostrar las consecuencias. Helen replicó:

—Considero esta observación muy grosera. ¿Por qué razón me ataca usted? —y, de pronto, el saloncito se llenó con los ecos de una vulgar pelea.

—¿Usted me pregunta por qué le ataco?

—Sí.

—¿Para qué me ha hecho usted venir?

—¡Para ayudarle, estúpido! —gritó Helen—. ¡Y no grite!

—Yo no quiero su protección. Yo no quiero su té. Yo era feliz, ¿para qué quieren alterarme? —se volvió a míster Wilcox—. Se lo

voy a explicar a este caballero. Yo le pregunto, señor, ¿tengo que dejar que me picoteen el cerebro?

Míster Wilcox se volvió a Margaret con aquel aire de fuerza y humor que podía adoptar sin esfuerzo:

—¿Interrumpimos, miss Schlegel? ¿Podemos serle de alguna utilidad?

Margaret le ignoró.

—Yo estoy relacionado con una de las primeras sociedades aseguradoras, señor, y recibo lo que considero una invitación de estas... damas —arrastró la palabra—. Vengo y resulta que quieren picotearme el cerebro. Y yo le pregunto, ¿es esto justo?

—Enormemente injusto —dijo míster Wilcox provocando un ahogo en Evie, que sabía que su padre se estaba poniendo peligroso.

—Eh, ¿lo oyen ustedes? Enormemente injusto dice este caballero. ¡Ahí lo tienen! No contenta con... —señaló a Margaret—, no puede usted negarlo —levantó la voz; estaba entrando en el ritmo de una escena con Jacky—. Pero en cuanto les soy útil, la cosa cambia: «Oh, sí, enviad a buscarlo. Ponedle acertijos. Picotead su cerebro, oh, sí.» Miren cómo soy: un hombre tranquilo, un perfecto cumplidor de las leyes; no quiero situaciones desagradables, pero yo... yo...

—Usted... —dijo Margaret—, usted... usted...

Evie se echó a reír, como si estuviera presenciando una comedia.

—Usted es el hombre que intentó guiarse por la Estrella Polar .

Más carcajadas.

—Usted vio amanecer.

Carcajadas.

—Usted intentó huir de las nieblas que nos están ahogando; usted dejó atrás los libros y las casas en busca de la verdad. Usted estaba buscando un verdadero hogar.

—No veo la relación —dijo Leonard rojo de estúpida indignación.

—Yo tampoco —una pausa—. Usted era eso el domingo pasado y hoy es esto. ¡Míster Bast! Mi hermana y yo hemos hablado mucho de usted. Queríamos ayudarle, suponíamos que usted también nos ayudaría a nosotras. No le trajimos para hacer caridad (cosa que nos molesta) sino porque teníamos la esperanza de que habría alguna relación entre el domingo pasado y los demás días.

¿De qué sirven las estrellas y los árboles y el amanecer si no entran en nuestras vidas cotidianas? Nunca han entrado en la mía, pero en la suya, nosotras pensábamos que... ¿No tenemos que luchar todos contra la mediocridad de nuestra vida diaria, contra la alegría mecánica, contra la suspicacia? Yo lucho recordando a mis amigos; otras personas que conozco lo hacen recordando algún lugar, algún lugar o algún árbol querido. Nosotras creíamos que usted era una de estas personas.

—Desde luego, si ha habido algún malentendido —murmuró Leonard—, lo único que puedo hacer es irme. Pero yo les ruego que aclaren... —hizo una pausa. *Achab* y *Jezabel* danzaban entre sus botas y le hacían parecer más ridículo—. Estaban ustedes picoteándome el cerebro para obtener información comercial. Puedo probarlo, puedo... —resopló y se fue.

—¿Puedo ayudarle? —dijo míster Wilcox dirigiéndose a Margaret —. ¿Quiere que hable tranquilamente con él en el vestíbulo?

—Helen, ve tras él... haz algo, algo... para hacer entender a este cabezota.

Helen dudaba.

—¿Cree usted realmente —dijo el visitante— que debe ir?

Helen se fue al instante. Míster Wilcox continuó:

—Yo habría intervenido, pero me di cuenta de que podía usted sacudírselo de encima por sí misma. Preferí no intervenir. Estuvo usted magnífica, miss Schlegel, absolutamente espléndida. Le doy a usted mi palabra: pocas mujeres habrían conseguido dominar la situación.

—Sí —dijo Margaret distraídamente.

—Avasallarlo con aquellas frases tan largas fue lo que me impresionó más —exclamó Evie.

—Sí, es cierto —rió su padre—, todo aquello de la «alegría mecánica», ¡formidable!

—Lo siento mucho —dijo Margaret recobrándose—. Es una persona encantadora, de veras. No comprendo qué le sacó de quicio. Ha sido una situación muy desagradable para ustedes.

—No se preocupe —dijo míster Wilcox y luego, cambiando de expresión, preguntó si podía hablar como un viejo amigo. Concedido el permiso, dijo—: ¿No cree que debería ser usted más cuidadosa?

Margaret se rió, aunque sus pensamientos estaban todavía pendientes de Helen.

—¿Se da usted cuenta de que todo esto es culpa suya? —dijo ella—. Usted es el único responsable.

—¿Yo?

—Sí. Éste es el joven a quien teníamos que prevenir sobre el asunto de la Porphyrion. Le previnimos y ya ve los resultados.

Míster Wilcox estaba desconcertado.

—Creo que esta deducción no es justa —dijo.

—Evidentemente, es injusta —dijo Margaret—. Sólo estaba pensando en lo complicadas que son las cosas. En gran parte, la culpa es nuestra. Ni de usted ni de él.

—¿Ah, no es de él?

—No.

—Miss Schlegel, es usted demasiado generosa.

—Ya lo creo —asintió Evie un tanto despectivamente.

—Se comporta usted demasiado bien con la gente y la gente acaba por imponérsele. Yo conozco el mundo, y conozco a este tipo de hombres. En cuanto entré en la habitación comprendí que no le había tratado usted del modo adecuado. Hay que guardar las distancias con estos tipos. De lo contrario pierden la compostura. Es triste, pero cierto. No son de nuestra clase y hay que afrontar este hecho.

—Sí...

—Admita que no habríamos tenido que soportar tantas impertinencias si ese individuo hubiera sido un caballero.

—Lo admito sin reservas —dijo Margaret que paseaba arriba y abajo de la habitación—. Un caballero habría disimulado sus sospechas.

Míster Wilcox la contempló con una vaga incomodidad.

—¿Qué sospechas?

—Que queríamos sacarle dinero.

—¡Menudo animal! ¡Es intolerable! ¿Pero cómo habrían ustedes de aprovecharse de él?

—Exacto, ¿cómo? ¡Ah, la horrible y corrosiva sospecha! Un ápice de reflexión o de buena voluntad la habrían disipado. El miedo insensato es lo que hace a los hombres comportarse como animales intolerables.

—Vuelvo a mi punto de partida: debería usted ser más cuidadosa, miss Schlegel. Sus criados deberían tener órdenes de no dejar entrar a esta clase de personas.

Ella se volvió hacia su visitante francamente.

—Déjeme explicarle por qué nos gusta este hombre y por qué queremos que vuelva.

—Vamos, esto es lo que usted dice. Yo nunca creeré que le gusta este hombre.

—Pues sí. En primer lugar, porque se siente atraído por la aventura, igual que usted. Sí, usted va en coche, caza... a él le gusta ir al campo. En segundo lugar, porque busca algo especial en la aventura. Es más rápido llamar a este algo especial poesía.

—Ah, ya, es un escritor.

—No, no. Podría serlo, pero escribiría unas insensateces pesadísimas. Tiene la cabeza llena de residuos de libros y cultura: horroroso. Nosotras pretendemos que despeje su cabeza y que vaya directamente a la realidad, queremos enseñarle a encontrar la verdadera vida. Como ya le dije:!os amigos, el campo, algo... —vaciló—. Al parecer, se necesita alguna persona querida o algún lugar querido para aliviar la monotonía cotidiana y para comprobar que es realmente gris. A ser posible, uno debería tener ambas cosas.

Algunas palabras resbalaron sobre míster Wilcox. Las dejó resbalar. Captó otras y las criticó con admirable lucidez.

—Su equivocación es ésta, una equivocación muy común. Este jovenzuelo zascandil tiene su propia vida. ¿Con qué derecho saca usted la conclusión de que su vida es un fracaso o, como usted acaba de llamarla, «gris»?

—Porque...

—Un momento, un momento. Usted no sabe nada de él. Probablemente tendrá sus propios placeres, sus centros de interés: la mujer, los niños, una casita confortable... Por eso nosotros, los individuos prácticos —sonrió—, somos más tolerantes que ustedes, los intelectuales. Vivimos y dejamos vivir; suponemos que los demás se apañan buenamente y que el hombre de la calle está plenamente capacitado para cuidar de sí mismo. Le concedo que... Verá, yo miro las caras de mis empleados en la oficina y observo que son sombrías, sí, pero no sé lo que hay detrás. Lo mismo digo, por otra parte, de Londres. En cierta ocasión le oí despotricar de Londres, miss Schlegel, y, aunque parezca extraño, me puse furioso con usted. ¿Qué sabe de Londres? Usted sólo ve la civilización desde fuera. No digo que sea este su caso, pero muchas veces esta actitud lleva a la morbosidad, al descontento y al socialismo.

Margaret admitió la fuerza de los argumentos del hombre, aunque fueran argumentos contrarios a la imaginación. A medida que él hablaba, algunas avanzadillas de la poesía y quizá de la compasión se derrumbaban. Margaret se retiró a lo que llamaba «su segunda línea»: a los hechos específicos del caso.

—Su mujer es una vieja aburrida —dijo simplemente refiriéndose a Leonard—. Él no regresó a casa el sábado por la noche porque quería estar solo. Entonces ella pensó que estaba con nosotras.

—¿Con ustedes?

Evie rió entre dientes.

—Sí. No tiene la casita confortable que usted le atribuye. Necesita de algún interés externo.

—¡Qué hombre más pícaro!

—¡Pícaro! —dijo Margaret que odiaba la picardía más que al pecado—. Cuando usted se case, miss Wilcox, ¿no necesitará de algún interés externo?

—Al parecer, este tipo lo ha encontrado —apuntó míster Wilcox astutamente.

—Cierto, padre, cierto.

—Estaba vagando por Surrey, si es eso lo que quiere decir —dijo Margaret alejándose despechada.

—¡Oh, sí, sin duda!

—¡Es cierto, miss Wilcox!

—Hummm —dijo míster Wilcox, que consideraba el episodio divertido, pero delicado. Con la mayoría de las damas no lo habría comentado, pero consideraba a Margaret una mujer emancipada.

—Eso dijo, y no mentiría en una cosa así.

Ambos se pusieron a reír.

—Ahí es donde discrepo de usted. Los hombres mienten cuando se trata de su dinero y de sus expectativas, pero no en esta clase de asuntos.

Él agitó la cabeza.

—Discúlpeme, miss Schlegel, pero conozco a este tipo de...

—Ya le dije antes que no es un «tipo». Se siente atraído por la aventura, está convencido de que nuestra pretenciosa existencia no lo es todo. Es vulgar, histérico y retórico, pero hay algo más: hombría. Sí, eso es lo que intento decir. Es un hombre de una pieza.

Mientras hablaba, sus ojos se encontraron y fue como si las defensas de míster Wilcox se derrumbasen. Vio al hombre de una pieza que también había en él. Por indelicadeza, Margaret había tocado sus sentimientos. Una mujer y dos hombres habían formado el mágico triángulo del sexo, y el macho temblaba de celos ante la posibilidad de que la hembra se sintiera atraída por otro macho. El amor, dicen los ascetas, revela nuestro vergonzoso parentesco con los animales. Si es así, puede soportarse. Los celos son lo auténticamente vergonzoso. Son los celos y no el amor los que nos vinculan de un modo insoportable con el corral de la granja, los que sugieren la imagen de dos gallos furiosos y una gallina

complaciente. Margaret, como era civilizada, sofocaba su complacencia. Míster Wilcox, que era incivilizado, continuaba furioso aún después de haber reconstruido sus defensas y de presentar un bastión frente al mundo.

—Miss Schlegel, son ustedes un par de criaturas encantadoras, pero han de ser más cuidadosas en este mundo sin piedad. ¿Qué dice a esto su hermano?

—Lo he olvidado.

—Sin duda tendrá alguna opinión al respecto.

—Se ríe, si no recuerdo mal.

—Es muy listo, ¿verdad? —dijo Evie que había conocido a Tibby en Oxford y lo detestaba.

—Sí, bastante... Me pregunto qué estará haciendo Helen.

—Es demasiado joven para hacerse cargo de este tipo de cosas —dijo míster Wilcox.

Margaret salió al descansillo. No oyó nada y vio que el sombrero de míster Bast había desaparecido del recibidor.

—¡Helen! —llamó.

—¿Sí? —contestó una voz desde la biblioteca.

—¿Estás ahí?

—Sí. Hace rato que se ha ido.

Margaret fue a su encuentro.

—¿Qué haces? Estás sola —dijo.

—Sí. Estoy bien, Meg. Pobre criatura, pobre...

—Vuelve con los Wilcox y cuéntamelo todo después. Míster W. está muy preocupado y un tanto excitado.

—No lo soporto. Le odio. ¡Pobre míster Bast! Quería hablar de literatura y nosotras le hablábamos de negocios. Qué hombre más enredado y, sin embargo, cómo me gustaría ayudarle a salir del apuro. Le aprecio extraordinariamente.

—Bien hecho —dijo Margaret besándola—, pero vuelve al salón y no hables de él a los Wilcox. Quítale importancia al asunto.

Helen volvió y se comportó con tal alegría que tranquilizó al visitante: al menos esa gallina parecía libre de caprichos.

—Se fue con mi bendición —exclamó—. Y ahora dediquémonos a los cachorrillos.

Cuando se fueron, míster Wilcox dijo a su hija:

—Me preocupa el modo en que se conducen estas dos chicas. Son todo lo inteligentes que tú quieras, pero no tienen el menor sentido práctico. ¡Bendito sea Dios! Uno de estos días irán demasiado lejos. Muchachas como éstas no deberían vivir en Londres. Tendrían que tener a alguien que las vigilase hasta que se casaran. Tenemos que venir a verlas más a menudo. Mejor nosotros que nadie. ¿Te gustan, verdad, Evie?

—Helen está bien —replicó Evie—, pero no soporto a la dentona. Y yo no les llamaría chicas a ninguna de las dos.

Evie se había vuelto guapa. Ojos oscuros con el brillo de la juventud bañada por el sol, un cuerpo sólido y unos labios firmes era lo máximo que los Wilcox podían producir en el terreno de la belleza femenina. Por el momento, los cachorrillos y su padre eran las únicas cosas que amaba. Pero las redes del matrimonio estaban preparadas y pocos días más tarde se sintió atraída por un tal míster Percy Cahill, tío de la mujer de Charles, y él se sintió atraído por Evie.

CAPÍTULO XVII

La Era de la Propiedad ha traído consigo momentos amargos incluso para los propietarios. Cuando un traslado es inminente, los enseres se vuelven ridículos. Margaret, en aquellos momentos, pasaba las noches en claro preguntándose dónde, ¡dónde diablos! se meterían ellos y sus pertenencias el próximo mes de septiembre. Sillas, mesas, cuadros, libros, objetos que habían rodado hasta ellos de generación en generación, debían seguir rodando como una bola de nieve de desperdicios que Margaret de buena gana habría enviado rodando al mar. Pero ahí estaban los libros de su padre: nadie los había leído, pero eran de su padre y había que conservarlos. Ahí estaba el costurero con tablero de mármol, al que su madre atribuía una gran utilidad, Dios sabe por qué. Había sentimientos adheridos a cada manecilla, a cada cojín de la casa, sentimientos personales a veces, pero más frecuentemente, sentimientos de piedad por los muertos, una prolongación de los ritos que deberían haber concluido en la tumba.

Era absurdo, si se pensaba. Helen y Tibby lo pensaron, pero Margaret estaba demasiado absorbida por los agentes de la propiedad. La propiedad feudal comportaba una cierta dignidad; la moderna propiedad de bienes muebles, en cambio, nos reduce a la categoría de horda trashumante. Estamos desembocando en la civilización del equipaje. Los historiadores futuros observarán que la clase media de nuestra época acrecentaba sus pertenencias sin echar raíces en la tierra y tal vez encuentre ahí el secreto de su pobreza imaginativa. Los Schlegel se sentían desamparados por la pérdida de Wickham Place. Wickham Place los ayudaba a equilibrar sus vidas, casi les aconsejaba. Pero tampoco el propietario se enriquecía espiritualmente. Construía cada vez más pisos en sus

terrenos, sus automóviles eran cada vez más rápidos, su refutación del socialismo era cada vez más tajante, pero había roto la preciosa destilación de los años y ninguna medicina podía devolverla otra vez a la sociedad.

Margaret se fue deprimiendo. Quería zanjar definitivamente la cuestión de la casa antes de dejar Londres para pasar unos días, como cada año, con mistress Munt. Margaret apreciaba mucho aquellas vacaciones y quería tener la cabeza despejada de problemas para poder disfrutarlas. Swanage era un lugar triste pero estable y aquel año Margaret ansiaba más que de costumbre su aire fresco y las magníficas colinas de Downs que se alzan al norte de Swanage, como centinelas. Pero Londres la obnubilaba; en su ambiente no se podía concentrar. Londres estimula, pero no sostiene, y Margaret, al tiempo que correteaba por la superficie de la ciudad en busca de una casa sin saber siquiera qué clase de casa quería, pagaba el precio de las muchas sensaciones excitantes del pasado. No podía, por otra parte, desprenderse del lastre cultural: perdía el tiempo en conciertos a los que habría sido un crimen no asistir y en invitaciones a las que no habría sido capaz de rehusar. Al final se desesperó; decidió que no iría a ninguna parte, que se encerraría hasta encontrar una casa. A la media hora había roto su determinación.

En cierta ocasión, bromeando, se había lamentado de no conocer el restaurante Simpson, en el Strand. La nota que le llegó era una invitación de miss Wilcox para comer en ese restaurante. Les acompañaría míster Cahill, los tres charlarían animadamente y acabarían, tal vez, en el Hipódromo. Margaret no se sentía muy atraída por Evie y menos aún deseaba conocer a su prometido. Le sorprendió que no hubiesen invitado a Helen, que había insistido más en lo de Simpson. La invitación le conmovió por su tono íntimo y decidió que tendría que conocer a Evie más a fondo, de modo que declaró que «sencillamente, debía aceptar» y aceptó.

El ánimo le flaqueó de nuevo en cuanto vio a Evie en la puerta del restaurante, mirando firmemente a ninguna parte como era moda entre las mujeres deportistas. Miss Wilcox había cambiado perceptiblemente desde su compromiso. Su voz era más áspera, sus maneras más abiertas y adoptaba un cierto aire protector para con las vírgenes inexpertas. Margaret era lo bastante tonta como para

sentirse afectada por esa actitud. Deprimida por el aislamiento, veía deslizarse ante sus ojos el barco de la vida llevando a bordo no sólo casas y muebles, sino personas como Evie y míster Cahill.

Hay momentos en que la virtud y la sabiduría nos abandonan y uno de esos momentos se produjo en Simpson, en el Strand. Mientras subía las escaleras, estrechas y cubiertas de espesas alfombras; mientras entraban en el comedor donde unos clérigos expectantes cortaban a rodajas una espalda de cabrito, Margaret experimentó una fuerte aunque errónea sensación de futilidad y deseó no haber salido de su pecera, donde nada se agitaba excepto el arte y la literatura, donde nadie se casaba, donde nadie lograba siquiera un noviazgo prolongado. Entonces hubo una pequeña sorpresa. «Papá dijo que quizá vendría. Sí, ahí está.» Con una sonrisa de placer, Margaret se dirigió hacia él y la sensación de soledad se desvaneció.

—Me había propuesto venir si el trabajo me lo permitía —dijo él —. Evie me contó sus planes, así que me dejé caer por aquí y reservé mesa. Siempre hay que reservar mesa. Evie, no finjas que quieres sentarte al lado de tu anciano padre, porque no es cierto. Miss Schlegel, siéntese a mi lado, por compasión. ¡Dios mío, tiene usted un aspecto abatido! ¿Ha estado preocupándose de sus jóvenes oficinistas?

—¿Oficinistas? No, casas —dijo Margaret pasando junto a él hacia el reservado—. Y estoy hambrienta, no abatida. Quiero comer toneladas.

—Eso está bien. ¿Qué tomará?

—Pastel de pescado —dijo ella echando una ojeada al menú.

—¡Pastel de pescado! ¡Qué idea, tomar pastel de pescado en Simpson! No es eso lo que hay que pedir aquí.

—Entonces, escoja algo por mí —dijo Margaret quitándose los guantes. Estaba recobrando el humor y la referencia a Leonard Bast le había reanimado de un modo sorprendente.

—Espalda de cabrito —dijo míster Wilcox tras una profunda reflexión— y sidra para beber. Eso es lo que hay que pedir. Me gusta este lugar, para variar... de vez en cuando. Es tan *old english*, ¿verdad?

—Sí —dijo Margaret sin estar de acuerdo. Se hizo el encargo, las cosas siguieron su curso y el cocinero, bajo la dirección de míster Wilcox, cortó la carne, que era suculenta, y la apiló en los platos. Míster Cahill insistió en tomar solomillo, pero acabó admitiendo que se había equivocado. Evie y él se enzarzaron en una conversación de «Sí, fuiste tú» «no, no fui yo» que, si bien resulta fascinante para quienes la sostienen, ni desea ni merece la atención de los demás.

—Es una regla de oro dar propina al cocinero. Dar propina a todo el mundo es mi lema.

—Sí, supongo que hace la vida más humana.

—Así la gente te reconoce en otra ocasión. Especialmente en el Este; allí, si das una propina, te recuerdan por los siglos de los siglos.

—¿Ha estado usted en Oriente?

—Bueno, en Grecia y Levante. Solía ir por motivos comerciales y deportivos a Chipre. Es una especie de sociedad militar. Unas pocas piastras sabiamente distribuidas ayudan a conservar fresco el recuerdo de uno. Pero, naturalmente, esto a usted le parecerá muy cínico. ¿Cómo va su club de debates? ¿Ha surgido alguna nueva utopía últimamente?

—No, ahora me dedico a la caza de la vivienda, míster Wilcox, como ya le dije. ¿Sabe usted de alguna casa?

—Me temo que no.

—Vaya, ¿de qué sirve ser práctico si no puede proporcionar una casa a dos mujeres angustiadas? Nosotras nos conformamos con una casita pequeña que tenga muchas y amplias habitaciones.

—¡Evie, escucha esto! Miss Schlegel quiere que me convierta en su agente de la propiedad.

—¿Qué pasa, padre?

—Necesito una casa nueva antes de septiembre y alguien tiene que encontrarla, ya que yo no puedo.

—Percy, ¿tú sabes algo de algo?

—Me parece que no —dijo míster Cahill.

—¡Muy propio de ti! No sirves para nada.

—¡Que no sirvo para nada! ¿Han oído? ¡Para nada! Oh, vamos...

—Está bien, está bien, no eres un inútil. ¿Qué opina usted, miss Schlegel?

El torrente del amor, después de haber salpicado con unas gotas a Margaret, se desvió hacia su curso habitual. Margaret los miró con simpatía. Con el aplomo había recobrado la sociabilidad. La conversación y el silencio le complacían por igual, así que, mientras míster Wilcox hacía algunas averiguaciones previas sobre el queso, sus ojos estudiaron el restaurante y admiraron sus bien calculados tributos a la solidez de nuestro pasado. Aunque no era más *old english* que las obras de Kipling, había seleccionado las reminiscencias con tanta precisión que el sentido crítico de Margaret se sintió atenuado. Los comensales, a quienes se alimentaba con propósitos imperiales, conservaban la apariencia externa de Parson Adams o de Tom Jones. Retazos de conversaciones llegaban caprichosamente a los oídos de Helen. «¡Tiene usted razón! Cablegrafiaré esta noche a Uganda», llegó de la mesa vecina. «¿El emperador quiere guerra? Bueno, la tendrá», opinaba el clérigo. Margaret sonrió ante estas incongruencias.

—La próxima vez —dijo a míster Wilcox—, vendrá usted a comer conmigo al míster Eustace Miles.

—Será un placer.

—No, no le gustará nada —dijo ella alargando el vaso para que le sirviera más sidra—. Allí todo son proteínas y vitaminas; la gente se te acerca y te dice: perdone, pero tiene usted una aura muy hermosa.

—¿Una qué?

—¿Nunca ha oído hablar del aura? ¡Oh, dichoso mortal! Yo dedico horas a la mía. ¿Tampoco le han hablado a usted del plano astral?

Míster Wilcox había oído hablar de planos astrales y los censuraba.

—Así es. Afortunadamente, era el aura del Helen, no la mía. Tuvo que seguir la corriente y hacer los cumplidos de rigor. Yo me

limité a permanecer sentada, con el pañuelo en la boca, hasta que se marchó aquel individuo.

—Al parecer viven ustedes unas experiencias muy divertidas.

A mí nadie me ha dicho nunca nada de mí... ¿cómo dice que se llama? A lo mejor es que no tengo.

—Oh, sí, tiene que tener, a la fuerza. Pero quizá es de un color tan horrible que nadie se atreve a mencionarla.

—Dígame, miss Schlegel, ¿cree usted realmente en lo sobrenatural y todo eso?

—Esa es una pregunta difícil de contestar.

—¿Por qué? ¿Gruyere o Stilton?

—Gruyere, por favor.

—Es mejor que tome Stilton.

—Pues Stilton. Porque, aunque no creo en auras, creo que la teosofía es sólo un inicio de camino...

—...es decir, que puede haber algo, a fin de cuentas —concluyó él frunciendo el entrecejo.

—Ni siquiera eso. Puede ser un inicio de camino en una dirección equivocada. No puedo explicárselo. No creo en todas estas modas y, sin embargo, no me gusta decir que no creo en ellas.

Míster Wilcox pareció poco satisfecho y añadió:

—¿De modo que no me daría usted su palabra de que no tiene relación con los cuerpos astrales y todo lo demás?

—Podría hacerlo, sí —dijo Margaret sorprendida de que aquel punto tuviera alguna importancia para él—. Desde luego que sí. Cuando le dije que perdía horas cultivando mi aura sólo pretendía ser graciosa. Pero, ¿por qué quiere saberlo?

—No lo sé.

—Vamos, míster Wilcox, sí que lo sabe.

—Sí, lo sé.

—No, no lo sabe —corearon los enamorados. Margaret guardó silencio un momento y luego cambió de tema.

—¿Qué tal va la casa?

—Igual que cuando usted la honró la semana pasada.

—No me refiero a la de Ducei Street, sino a la de Howards End, por supuesto.

—¿Por qué «por supuesto»?

—¿No podría usted echar al inquilino y meternos a nosotros? Estamos enloquecidos.

—Déjeme pensar. Me gustaría ayudarlos. Pero yo creía que querían quedarse en la ciudad. Le voy a dar un consejo: elija un distrito, luego elija un precio y no se mueva. Así conseguí yo Ducie Street y Oniton. Me dije a mí mismo: «Quiero estar exactamente ahí» y ahí estoy. Y como Oniton hay mil sitios.

—Pero yo me muevo. Los hombres parecen imantar las casas: las miran fijamente y las casas acuden temblando. Las mujeres, no. Las casas nos imantan a nosotras. No controlo este viscoso asunto. Las casas están vivas, ¿no?

—Estoy perdido —dijo él y añadió—: No hablará usted en estos términos con el empleado de la agencia, ¿verdad?

—Claro, supongo que sí, más o menos. Yo hablo de la misma manera con todo el mundo... o, al menos, lo intento.

—Ya, ya sé. ¿Y cree usted que él le entiende?

—Eso es asunto suyo. No creo en eso de adaptar la conversación al interlocutor. Sin duda hay que encontrar un medio de comunicación que vaya bien, pero eso no quiere decir que sea lo verdadero; no más que el dinero y la comida. El dinero no es alimenticio. Se lo damos a las clases inferiores y ellos nos lo devuelven; es lo que se llama «relación social» o «mutuo esfuerzo», cuando no es más que mutua trivialidad, si es algo. Nuestros amigos de Chelsea no lo ven así. Dicen que hay que ser inteligible a toda costa y sacrificar...

—A las clases inferiores —interrumpió míster Wilcox como si metiera la mano en la disertación—. Bien, admite usted que hay ricos y pobres. Ya es algo.

Margaret no supo qué responder. ¿Era increíblemente idiota o la entendía mejor de lo que ella se entendía a sí misma?

—Usted admite que si la riqueza se dividiera en partes iguales, al cabo de pocos años habría otra vez ricos y pobres como ahora. El hombre trabajador estaría arriba y el inútil se iría al fondo.

—Todo el mundo admite eso.

—Sus socialistas, no.

—Mis socialistas, sí. Los suyos, quizá no; pero sospecho que los suyos no son socialistas, sino títeres que usted ha construido para su entretenimiento. No conozco a nadie a quien pueda rebatirse tan fácilmente.

Míster Wilcox se habría molestado si su oponente no hubiera sido una mujer. Pero las mujeres pueden decir cualquier cosa —ésa era una de sus creencias sagradas— y sólo respondió con una alegre sonrisa.

—No me importa. Ha hecho usted dos dañinas concesiones y yo estoy con usted de todo corazón en ambas.

Acabaron la comida y Margaret, que se había excusado de ir al Hipódromo, se marchó. Evie apenas si le había dirigido la palabra y Margaret sospechaba que la salida había sido planeada por el padre. Uno y otro estaban desligándose de sus respectivas familias en beneficio de un conocimiento más íntimo. La cosa venía de mucho tiempo atrás. Margaret había sido amiga de su mujer y, en calidad de tal, él le había dado aquel frasco de sales como recuerdo. Había sido muy amable por su parte el haberle dado aquel frasco de sales; siempre la había preferido a Helen, al contrario de lo que ocurría con la mayoría de los hombres. Pero los progresos en los últimos tiempos habían sido asombrosos. Habían avanzado más en una semana que en dos años y ambos empezaban a conocerse a fondo recíprocamente.

Margaret no olvidó su promesa de darle a conocer el Eustace Miles y le invitó a comer tan pronto pudo asegurarse la compañía de Tibby. Míster Wilcox acudió y compartió los platos vitaminados con humildad.

A la mañana siguiente los Schlegel se fueron a Swanage. No habían conseguido aún encontrar casa.

CAPÍTULO XVIII

Cuando estaban sentados en la mesa del desayuno de la tía Juley, en «Los Laureles», intentando contener la hospitalidad excesiva de aquélla y gozando de la vista de la bahía, llegó una carta para Margaret que la llenó de turbación. Era de míster Wilcox. Le anunciaba «un cambio importante» en los planes. Debido a la boda de Evie, había decidido abandonar su casa de Ducie Street y deseaba arrendarla por anualidades. Era una carta comercial y decía francamente lo que le convenía y lo que no le convenía. Fijaba también una renta. Si estaban conformes con las condiciones, Margaret debía acudir *de inmediato* (estas palabras estaban subrayadas, cosa necesaria cuando se tienen tratos comerciales con mujeres) e inspeccionar la casa con él. Si no estaban conformes, le agradecería un telegrama a fin de ponerse en manos de un agente.

La carta perturbó a Margaret porque no estaba segura de lo que quería decirse en ella. Si a míster Wilcox le gustaba Margaret, si había maniobrado para hacerle ir a Simpson, ¿no podía ser aquella carta una maniobra para hacerle ir a Londres y acabar pidiéndola en matrimonio? Margaret se lo planteó a sí misma del modo más indelicado posible, con la esperanza de que su mente gritaría: «¡Qué barbaridad! ¡Eres una tonta presuntuosa!» Pero su mente sólo cosquilleó un poco y guardó silencio. Durante un rato Margaret se sentó a contemplar cómo rompían las olas y a preguntarse si la noticia sorprendería a los demás.

Apenas empezó a hablar, el sonido de su voz la tranquilizó: no dejaba traslucir nada. También las réplicas eran normales y en el ronroneo de la conversación sus temores se desvanecieron.

—No tienes por qué ir... —empezó a decir su anfitriona.

—No tengo por qué, pero ¿no sería mejor que fuera? la cosa se está poniendo seria. Hemos dejado escapar una oportunidad tras otra y vamos a terminar en mitad de la calle, empaquetados con todos los enseres. No sabemos lo que queremos, éste es nuestro problema...

—No, no tenemos ninguna querencia —dijo Helen sirviéndose una tostada.

—Me pregunto si no debería ir hoy a la ciudad, quedarme con la casa si hay la más mínima posibilidad, volver en el tren de mañana por la tarde y empezar a disfrutar de una vez. No habrá distracción para mí ni para los demás hasta que no me quite de la cabeza este dichoso asunto.

—¿No tomarás una decisión precipitada, Margaret?

—No hay razón alguna para precipitarse.

—¿Y quiénes son los Wilcox? —dijo Tibby; una pregunta que puede parecer tonta, pero que resultaba sumamente conveniente, como pensó su tía cuando intentó contestarla—. No consigo *situar* a los Wilcox; no veo adonde van a parar.

—Yo tampoco —admitió Helen—. Es extraño que no les hayamos perdido de vista. De todas las personas que hemos conocido en hoteles, míster Wilcox es el único que permanece. Hace ya tres años de eso y nos hemos alejado de personas mucho más interesantes en ese tiempo.

—La gente interesante no proporciona casas.

—Margaret, si empiezas con tu faceta de inglesa honrada, te tiro el tarro de confitura por la cabeza.

—Es mejor que la faceta cosmopolita —dijo Margaret levantándose—. Y ahora, niños, ¿qué va a pasar? Ya conocéis la casa de Ducie Street. ¿Digo que sí o digo que no? Tibby, cariño, ¿qué dices? Estoy impaciente por oír vuestra opinión.

—Todo depende del sentido que des a las palabras «la más mínima posi...»

—No depende de nada, Tibby. Di «sí».

—Digo «no».

Entonces Margaret habló con seriedad:

—Creo —dijo— que nuestra raza está degenerando. No podemos resolver ni siquiera una cosa tan nimia como ésta, ¿qué sucederá cuando tengamos que resolver una cosa realmente importante?

—Será tan fácil como comer —respondió Helen.

—Estaba pensando en nuestro padre. ¿Cómo pudo decidirse a dejar Alemania, después de haber luchado por ella en su juventud, cuando sus sentimientos y sus amigos estaban allí? ¿Cómo pudo romper con su patriotismo y enderezar sus pasos en otra dirección? Es algo que a mí me mataría. Cuando tenía casi cuarenta años fue capaz de cambiar de país y de ideales. Y nosotros, a nuestra edad, no somos capaces de cambiar de casa. Es humillante.

—Quizá tu padre fue capaz de cambiar de país —dijo mistress Munt con aspereza—, y eso puede que sea bueno o puede que no. Pero no era más capaz de lo que sois vosotros de cambiar de casa. A decir verdad, lo hacía mucho peor. Nunca olvidaré lo que llegó a sufrir la pobre Emily cuando se trasladaron de Manchester a Londres.

—¡Lo sabía! —exclamó Helen—. Ya te lo dije. Son las cosas pequeñas las que lo enredan todo. Las importantes, las auténticas, no son nada cuando llegan.

—¡Enredar, querida! Eres muy joven para acordarte... es decir, ni siquiera estabas en el mundo cuando sucedió. Pero el mobiliario ya estaba en los camiones antes de que el contrato de arrendamiento de Wickham Place estuviera firmado. Emily tomó el tren con la nena, que era Margaret, y el equipaje de mano y se fue a Londres sin saber siquiera dónde estaba la nueva casa. Abandonar esa casa puede resultar duro, pero no será nada comparado con las penurias que tuvimos que pasar para meternos en ella.

Helen, con la boca llena, exclamó:

—Y éste es el hombre que venció a los austríacos, a los daneses, a los franceses, y a los alemanes que llevaba dentro. Y nosotros somos como él.

—Habla por ti —dijo Tibby—. Y, por favor, recuerda que yo soy un cosmopolita.

—Tal vez Helen tenga razón.

—Desde luego que tiene razón —dijo Helen.

Quizá Helen tenía razón, pero no fue a Londres y en cambio Margaret, sí fue. Unas vacaciones interrumpidas son el peor de los males menores y hay que perdonar a quien se sienta deprimido cuando una carta comercial le separa bruscamente del mar y los amigos. Margaret no podía creer que su padre hubiera experimentado nunca la misma sensación. Había sufrido molestias en los ojos últimamente y no pudo leer en el tren, así que se aburrió mirando el paisaje que había visto el día anterior. En Southampton dijo adiós a Frieda. Frieda iba a reunirse con ellos en Swanage y mistress Munt había calculado que sus trenes se cruzarían. Pero Frieda estaba mirando hacia otro lado y Margaret prosiguió el viaje hasta la ciudad sintiéndose una solitaria solterona. ¡Oh, qué reacción más típica de una solterona: imaginar que míster Wilcox la cortejaba! Margaret había visitado una vez a una solterona pobre, tonta y poco agraciada, poseída por la manía de que cada hombre que se le acercaba se enamoraba de ella. ¡Cómo había sangrado el corazón de Margaret al ver aquellas alucinaciones! ¡Cómo había disertado, razonado y, finalmente desesperada, asentido! «Quizá el vicario me ha engañado, querida, pero ese jovenzuelo que trae el correo al mediodía está entusiasmado conmigo, de veras; para serte sincera, ya me ha...» Siempre le había parecido el más detestable rincón de la senilidad; y, no obstante, tal vez ella estaba cayendo en lo mismo, arrinconada por la mera presión de la virginidad.

Míster Wilcox la esperaba en Waterloo. Margaret advirtió que no era el de siempre. Por alguna razón, se ofendía por todo cuanto ella decía.

—Ha sido usted extraordinariamente amable —empezó Margaret —, pero me temo que no va a resultar. Aún no se ha edificado la casa que necesita la familia Schlegel.

—¡Qué dice! ¿Ha venido decidida a no cerrar el trato?

—No exactamente.

—¿No exactamente? Pues empecemos.

Margaret se demoró admirando el automóvil, un vehículo nuevo y más hermoso que el gigante bermellón que había transportado a la tía Juley a su perdición tres años atrás.

—Presumo que es muy hermoso —dijo—. ¿Qué le parece a usted, Crane?

—Vamos, empecemos —repitió su acompañante—. ¿Y cómo diablos sabe usted que mi chófer se llama Crane?

—Porque conozco a Crane: una vez fui a pasear con Evie. Sé también que tiene usted un ama de llaves llamada Milton. Lo sé todo.

—¡Evie! —repitió él en un tono dolido—. No la verá, se fue con Cahill. No es divertido, sabe usted, que le dejen a uno solo. Trabajo todo el día, demasiado, a decir verdad, pero cuando vuelvo por la noche, créame, se me cae la casa encima.

—A mi manera absurda, yo también estoy sola —replicó Margaret—. Es muy triste tener que abandonar el viejo hogar. Apenas recuerdo nada anterior a Wickham Place. Helen y Tibby nacieron allí. Helen dice que...

—¿También usted se siente sola?

—Terriblemente sola. ¡Mire, la parte de atrás del Parlamento!

Míster Wilcox miró el Parlamento despectivamente. Las riendas más importantes estaban en otro sitio.

—Sí, están cotorreando, como de costumbre —dijo—. Pero iba usted a decir...

—Alguna tontería sobre el mobiliario. Helen dice que sólo el mobiliario perdura, en tanto que las personas y las casas perecen y que en el fin del mundo habrá un desierto de sillas y sofás... ¡imagínese! que se extenderá hasta el infinito, sin nadie que se siente encima.

—A su hermana le encanta bromear.

—Helen dice que sí y mi hermano dice que no a la casa de Ducie Street. No es divertido ayudarnos, míster Wilcox, se lo aseguro.

—No es usted tan impráctica como aparenta ser. No lo creeré nunca.

Margaret se rió. Pero lo era: casi tan impráctica como aparentaba ser. No podía concentrarse en los detalles. El Parlamento, el Támesis, el chófer silencioso se cruzaban en el terreno de la caza de la vivienda y reclamaban un comentario o una

respuesta. Es imposible ver la vida moderna a fondo y en su totalidad. Margaret había decidido verla en su totalidad. Míster Wilcox la veía a fondo, jamás se preocupaba de lo misterioso o de lo privado. El Támesis podía correr corriente arriba, el chófer podía ocultar todas las pasiones y toda la filosofía de este mundo bajo su piel mortecina. Allá ellos con sus asuntos. El suyo era éste.

Con todo, a Margaret le gustaba estar con él. Míster Wilcox no era un repelente, sino un estímulo y hacía que su depresión se desvaneciera. Veinte años mayor que Margaret, conservaba un don que ella creía haber perdido ya: no el poder creativo de la juventud, sino la confianza es sí mismo y el optimismo a ultranza. Estaba seguro de que éste es un mundo agradable. Su complexión era robusta, su pelo había retrocedido, pero no clareaba, su espeso bigote y los ojos que Helen había comparado con copas de coñac ocultaban una agradable amenaza, tanto si contemplaban las barracas como si escrutaban las estrellas. Algún día, dentro de miles de años, este tipo de individuo no será ya necesario. Por el momento, deben rendirle homenaje aquéllos que se creen superiores y que posiblemente lo son.

—En cualquier caso, contestó usted en seguida a mi telegrama —hizo notar míster Wilcox.

—Bueno, hasta yo soy capaz de ver una cosa interesante cuando la tengo delante.

—Me alegra que no desprecie usted los bienes terrenales.

—¡No, por Dios! Sólo los idiotas y los presuntuosos lo hacen.

—Me alegra mucho; mucho —repitió él, suavizándose súbitamente y volviéndose hacia ella, como si la observación le hubiese agradado—. Hay tanta hipocresía en los círculos pseudointelectuales... Me alegro de que usted no la comparta. El autosacrificio está muy bien como medio de fortalecer el carácter, pero no soporto a esos tipos que desprecian las comodidades. Suelen servir a intereses privados. ¿No opina usted igual?

—Las comodidades son de dos clases —dijo Margaret, que se mantenía en guardia—: las que podemos compartir con los demás, como el fuego, el tiempo o la música, y las otras, las que no podemos compartir, como la comida, por ejemplo. Depende.

—Me refiero al confort razonable, por supuesto. No me gustaría pensar que usted... —se aproximó, la frase quedó inconclusa. La cabeza de Margaret se volvió repentinamente estúpida y lo que tenía dentro pareció dar vueltas como el fanal de un faro. No la besó, porque eran las doce y cuarto y el coche pasaba frente a los establos de Buckingham Palace. Pero la atmósfera estaba tan cargada de emoción que la gente sólo parecía existir en función de ella y Margaret se sorprendió de que Crane no lo notase y se volviera. Por tonta que parezca Margaret, seguramente míster Wilcox estaba más... ¿cómo decirlo? más «psicólogo» de lo normal. Siempre había sido un buen juez de los caracteres ajenos por motivos comerciales y aquel día parecía haber ampliado el campo de sus actividades, apreciar cualidades otras que la limpieza, la obediencia y la decisión.

—Quiero recorrer la casa de arriba a abajo —dijo ella cuando llegaron—. Tan pronto vuelva a Swanage, o sea mañana por la tarde, se lo explicaré todo una vez más a Helen y a Tibby y le telegrafiaré «sí» o «no».

—Muy bien. El comedor —y empezaron la inspección.

El comedor era grande, sobrecargado. El espíritu de Chelsea habría gruñido. Míster Wilcox había rehuido los esquemas decorativos temerosos, suaves, moderados y bellos a costa del confort y la exuberancia. Acostumbrada al equilibrio y la despersonalización, Margaret contempló con alivio el suntuoso artesonado, el friso, el papel dorado entre cuyo follaje los papagayos cantaban. Eso jamás encajaría con su mobiliario, pero aquellas sillas pesadas, aquel inmenso aparador cargado de bandejas de plata, todo el mobiliario se mantenía erguido contra la presión de los muros, como un conjunto de seres humanos. La estancia tenía un toque masculino y Margaret, aficionada a suponer a los capitalistas modernos descendientes de los guerreros y cazadores del pasado, la vio como un antiguo salón de recepciones, donde se sentaba el señor feudal para el festín, en medio de sus pares. Incluso la Biblia, una Biblia holandesa que Charles había traído de la guerra de los bóers, encajaba. Una estancia semejante admitía el postín.

—Esto es el vestíbulo.

El vestíbulo estaba enlosado.

—Aquí fumamos los caballeros.

Los caballeros fumaban en butacas de cuero *beige.* Parecía como si procediesen del automóvil.

—¡Oh, magnífico! —exclamó Margaret apoltronándose en una de las butacas.

—¿Le gusta? —dijo él fijando los ojos en su cara alzada, traicionando una nota casi íntima—. Es una tontería no buscar la comodidad, ¿no le parece?

—Sí, una semitontería. ¿Éstos son Cruikshanks?

—Gillrays. ¿Vamos al piso de arriba?

—¿El mobiliario procede de Howards End?

—El mobiliario de Howards End está en Oniton.

—Ah, ya... Sin embargo, a mí me interesa la casa, no el mobiliario. ¿Cuánto mide la sala de fumar?

—Treinta pies por quince. No, espere, quince y medio...

—Ya, ya. Míster Wilcox, ¿no le divierte la solemnidad con que la clase media enfoca el tema de la vivienda?

Pasaron al salón. Allí el gusto de Chelsea se habría encontrado mejor. Era pálido e inefectivo. Margaret podía imaginarse a las damas retirándose al salón mientras los señores discutían las realidades de la vida abajo, con acompañamiento de cigarros. ¿Era parecido el salón de mistress Wilcox en Howards End? En el momento en que este pensamiento entró en el cerebro de Margaret, Mr. Wilcox le pidió que fuera su esposa y la revelación de que su presentimiento había sido certero la dejó tan perpleja que casi se desmayó.

Pero la declaración no fue de las que pasan a formar parte de las grandes escenas de amor de la historia.

—Miss Schlegel —la voz del hombre era firme—, la hice venir con un motivo falso. Quiero hablarle de un asunto mucho más serio que una casa.

Margaret casi contestó:

—Ya sé...

—¿Quiere compartir mi...? ¿Es posible que...?

—¡Oh, míster Wilcox! —interrumpió Margaret sosteniéndose en el piano y apartando los ojos—. Ya veo, ya veo. Le escribiré más adelante diciéndole sí o no.

Míster Wilcox empezó a tartamudear.

—Miss Schlegel... Margaret... no entiende...

—Oh, sí, ya lo creo que sí —dijo Margaret.

—Le estoy pidiendo que sea mi mujer.

Los sentimientos de Margaret eran tan profundos que cuando él dijo «Le estoy pidiendo que sea mi mujer», experimentó un ligero sobresalto. Debía mostrar sorpresa, si él lo esperaba así. Le invadió una alegría inmensa, indescriptible, que no tenía nada que ver con la alegría humana, sino con esa felicidad plena que da el buen tiempo y que lo impregna todo. El buen tiempo proviene del sol, pero Margaret, en aquella ocasión, no percibía ningún núcleo radiante. Se quedó inmóvil en el salón, feliz y deseosa de dar felicidad. Al separarse de él comprendió que el núcleo radiante era el amor.

—¿Está usted ofendida, miss Schlegel?

—No, no, ¿cómo iba a estarlo?

Hubo una pausa momentánea. Él estaba ansioso de verse libre de ella y ella lo sabía. Margaret era demasiado delicada para observarle cuando se debatía para obtener las posesiones que el dinero no puede comprar. Él deseaba la camaradería y el afecto, pero los temía; y ella, que sólo se había ejercitado en desear y que podía haber arropado aquella lucha con una dosis de belleza, se mantenía distante y vacilaba con él.

—Adiós —dijo Margaret—. Recibirá usted carta mía... Me vuelvo a Swanage mañana.

—Gracias.

—Adiós, y soy yo quien le da las gracias.

—¿Quiere que le acompañe el coche?

—Sería muy amable por su parte.

—Preferiría haber escrito. ¿No cree que habría sido mejor?

—De ningún modo.

—Quisiera hacerle una pregunta más...

Margaret agitó la cabeza. Míster Wilcox parecía un poco desconcertado y se separaron.

Se separaron sin darse siquiera la mano: Margaret había mantenido la entrevista, a causa de míster Wilcox, en un tono de perfecta neutralidad. Sin embargo, temblaba de felicidad antes de llegar a su casa. Otros la habían amado en el pasado, si puede darse un nombre tan serio a sus breves deseos, pero aquellos otros habían sido «tontarrones»: jóvenes que no tenían nada que hacer o viejos que no podían encontrar nada mejor. También ella había «amado» a menudo, pero sin sobrepasar los límites de la simple atracción sexual: meras capitulaciones ante el atractivo masculino, rechazadas como merecían, con una sonrisa. Nunca hasta entonces su personalidad se había visto afectada. No era joven ni muy rica y le sorprendía que un hombre de posición la tomara en serio. Cuando se sentó a reflexionar en su casa vacía, rodeada de bellas pinturas y nobles libros, le envolvió un torbellino de emoción, como si una marea de pasión flotara en el aire de la noche. Agitó la cabeza, intentó centrar sus pensamientos y no lo consiguió. En vano se repetía: «Esto ya me ha pasado antes.» Jamás le había pasado. La gran maquinaria, opuesta a la pequeña maquinaria, se había disparado y la idea de que míster Wilcox la amaba le obsesionaba aun antes de corresponder a su amor.

Sin embargo, no tomó ninguna decisión. «Oh, caballero, es algo tan repentino...» Esta púdica frase expresaba exactamente su estado de ánimo cuando llegó el momento. Las premoniciones no implican preparación. Margaret tenía que estudiar con más detenimiento su propia naturaleza y la de él; tenía que hablar judicialmente con Helen. Había sido una extraña escena de amor. Margaret reconocía el núcleo radiante del principio al final. Ella, en su lugar, habría dicho *Ich liebe dich*, aunque tal vez él no tuviera por costumbre desnudar su corazón. Quizá lo habría hecho si ella le hubiera presionado, como un deber —Inglaterra espera que cada uno de sus hombres abra su corazón una vez en la vida—, pero el esfuerzo le habría supuesto una conmoción y Margaret no permitiría, mientras pudiera evitarlo, que míster Wilcox se viera obligado a bajar las defensas que había erigido contra el mundo.

Nunca le molestaría con una charla emotiva o con una muestra de sentimentalismo. Ya era un hombre maduro y sería fútil e incorrecto corregirle.

Mistress Wilcox entraba y salía de su pensamiento como un fantasma querido, observando la escena (pensó Margaret) sin sombra de amargura.

CAPÍTULO XIX

Si se quiere mostrar Inglaterra a un extranjero, quizá lo mejor sea llevarle a las estribaciones de Purbeck Hills y hacerle subir a la cima, una milla al este de Corfe. De este modo se desplegarán a sus pies todos los aspectos de nuestra isla. Bajo las colinas está el valle del Frome y las tierras agrestes que bajan de Dorchester, negras y doradas, y van a reflejar sus aliagas en la amplia zona del Poole. Más allá se encuentra el valle del Stour, río inefable, sucio en Blandford, puro en Wimborne: el Stour, que emerge de los ricos campos para unirse al Avon bajo la torre de Chirstchurch. El valle del Avon, invisible, aunque el ojo avezado puede ver, en el lejano Norte, Cleabury Ring, que lo guarda, y la imaginación puede saltar más allá, a Salisbury Plain y aún más allá de la llanura, a los gloriosos Downs de la Inglaterra central. Ni siquiera la parte urbana está ausente de esta vista. La innoble costa de Bournemouth cubre a la derecha los pinos altivos que sugieren, con su belleza, las casas rojas y la Bolsa y que se extienden hasta las mismas puertas de Londres. Así es la expansión de la ciudad. Pero nunca tocará los riscos de Freshwaters y la isla conservará siempre su pureza de isla, hasta el fin de los tiempos. Vista desde el Oeste, la isla de Wight es hermosa más allá de las leyes de la hermosura. Es como si un fragmento de Inglaterra flotara en avanzadilla para saludar al extranjero: tierra de nuestra tierra, césped de nuestro césped, epítome de lo que vendrá después. Y tras este fragmento se encuentra Southampton, anfitrión de las naciones, y Portsmouth, un fuego latente, y a su alrededor, con doble y triple colisión de olas, bulle el mar. ¡Cuántas villas aparecen en esta panorámica! ¡Cuántos castillos! ¡Cuántas iglesias, pasadas o triunfantes! ¡Cuántos barcos, vías férreas y carreteras! ¡Qué increíble variedad de hombres

trabajando bajo el cielo esplendoroso —¿con qué objeto?—! La razón flaquea y se repliega como una ola en la playa de Swanage; la imaginación se dilata, se expande y se ahonda hasta volverse geográfica y abrazar toda Inglaterra.

Y por ello, Frieda Mosebach, ahora frau Architect Liesecke y madre de una criatura, fue llevada a esas alturas para que se impresionase y, tras una mirada prolongada, dijo que las colinas eran más elevadas allí que en Pomerania, lo cual era cierto, pero a mistress Munt le pareció una salida de tono. Poole Harbour estaba seco, cosa que incitó a Frieda a ensalzar la ausencia de lodo en la costa de Friedrich Wilhelms Bad, Rügen, donde las hayas se inclinan sobre el tranquilo Báltico sin mareas y donde las vacas pueden contemplar el mar. Muy a disgusto, mistress Munt pensó que tal vez fuera así, pero juzgó más sano que el mar se moviera.

—Y sus lagos ingleses, el Vindermere, el Grasmere, ¿son insanos?

—No, frau Liesecke, pero es porque son de agua dulce y diferente. El agua salada tiene que tener mareas y subir y bajar, de lo contrario huele mal. Fíjese, por ejemplo, en los acuarios.

—¡Un acuario! Oh, mistress Munt, ¿quiere usted hacerme creer que un acuario de agua dulce apesta menos que uno de agua salada? Vaya, cuando mi cuñado Víctor coleccionaba renacuajos...

—No se dice «apesta» —interrumpió Helen—. Puedes decirlo, pero no pretendas hacerte la graciosa cuando lo digas.

—Bueno, pues «huele». Y el lodo de ahí abajo en Pool, ¿no huele? ¿O debo decir «no apesta»? Ja, ja, ja.

—Siempre ha habido lodo en Poole Harbour —dijo mistress Munt con un ligero fruncimiento del ceño—. Los ríos lo traen y se forman unos criaderos de ostras valiosísimos.

—Sí, eso es verdad —concedió Frieda, y finalizó otro incidente internacional.

—Bournemouth es —resumió su anfitriona citando una rima local que le gustaba mucho—, «Bournemouth es, Poole era y Swanage será la ciudad más importante de todas y la mayor de las tres». Y ahora, frau Liesecke, ya le he enseñado Bournemouth y Poole, así que retrocedamos un poco y volvamos a ver Swanage.

—Tía Juley, ¿no será ése el tren de Margaret?

Una débil columna de humo había estado rodeando el puerto y se dirigía hacia el sur, hacia ellas, sobre el negro y oro.

—Oh, la querida Margaret, espero que no se haya cansado demasiado.

—Me pregunto... me pregunto si se habrá quedado con la casa.

—Ojalá no se haya precipitado.

—Eso espero yo también.

—¿Será tan bonita como la de Wickham Place? —preguntó Frieda.

—Supongo que sí. Confía en míster Wilcox cuando se trata de sacar partido de las cosas. Todas las casas de Ducie Street son bonitas, en su estilo moderno, y no entiendo por qué no la conserva. Aunque, bien pensado, se instaló allí por Evie, y ahora que Evie se va a casar...

—¡Ay!

—Nunca has visto a miss Wilcox, Frieda. ¡Eres absurdamente casamentera!

—¿No es hermana de Paul?

—Y de *aquel* Charles —dijo mistress Munt con mucho sentimiento—. Oh, Helen, Helen, ¡qué tiempos!

Helen se rió.

—Meg y yo no tenemos el corazón tan blando. Si se presenta la oportunidad de conseguir una casa a buen precio, la tomamos.

—Mire, frau Liesecke, el tren de mi sobrina. ¿Ve usted? Ya se acerca, ya se acerca. Cuando llegue a Corfe cruzará estas colinas; así que, si vamos al otro lado a ver Swanage, como yo proponía, lo veremos venir. ¿En marcha?

Frieda dijo que sí y en pocos minutos habían cruzado la cresta de la colina y cambiado la amplia panorámica por otra más reducida. Un valle bastante sombrío se extendía a sus pies, oscurecido por la ladera de los Downs costeros. A través de la isla de Purbeck veían Swanage, que pronto sería la ciudad más importante y más fea de las tres. El tren de Margaret reapareció, como mistress Munt había

pronosticado, y fue saludado con aprobación por la tía Juley. Se detuvo a corta distancia y allí, según estaba planeado, Tibby debía recoger a su hermana y llevarla, junto con la cesta de la merienda, a reunirse con las tres mujeres.

—¿Ves? —dijo Helen a su prima—, los Wilcox coleccionan casas como tu cuñado Víctor coleccionaba renacuajos. Fíjate en las que tienen: una, Ducie Street; dos, Howards End, donde organicé aquel desaguisado; tres, una casa de campo de Shropshire; cuatro, la casa de Charles en Hilton, y cinco, otra cerca de Epsom; seis, Evie tendrá una casa cuando se case y probablemente un refugio en el campo, lo cual suma... siete. Ah, y una choza para Paul en África, ocho. Me gustaría que nos quedáramos con Howards End. ¡Era una casita preciosa, una ricura! ¿No te parece, tía Juley?

—¡Ay, hija, ya tuve bastantes cosas que hacer para fijarme en la casa! —dijo mistress Munt con graciosa dignidad—. Tuve que arreglarlo todo y dar explicaciones, y parar los pies a Charles Wilcox, por añadidura. Me parece que no recuerdo casi nada. Sólo me acuerdo de haber comido en tu habitación.

—Sí, yo también. Y, sin embargo, ¡válgame Dios, qué muerto parece ahora todo aquello! Aquel otoño empezó el movimiento anti-Paulino: tú, Frieda, Meg y mistress Wilcox, todas obsesionadas con la idea de que podía casarme con Paul a pesar de todo.

—Aún podrías hacerlo —dijo Frieda con desaliento.

—El Gran Peligro de los Wilcox no volverá jamás. Si de algo estoy segura, es de esto.

—Uno nunca está seguro de nada si no es de la certeza de sus propias emociones.

La observación cayó tristemente en la conversación. Pero Helen rodeó con el brazo a su prima, como si la quisiera más por haberla dicho. No era una observación original, ni Frieda la había pronunciado con el apasionamiento adecuado, porque tenía una mentalidad más patriótica que filosófica. Con todo, revelaba ese interés por lo universal que tienen la mayoría de los teutones y del que generalmente carecen los ingleses. Era, ilógicamente, lo bueno, lo bello y lo verdadero, en contraposición a lo respetable, lo bonito y lo adecuado. Era como un paisaje de Böcklin al lado de un paisaje de Leader, estridente y tosco, pero trémulo de vida sobrenatural. La

frase de Frieda aguzaba el idealismo, conmovía el alma. Fue una mala preparación para lo que vino acto seguido.

—¡Miren! —gritó la tía Juley huyendo de las generalizaciones por la estrecha cresta del Down—. Vengan donde yo estoy y verán el carrito. ¡Ya veo el carrito!

Fueron a su lado y vieron venir el carrito. Margaret y Tibby estaban a la vista. Dejando atrás las laderas de Swanage, el carrito recorrió los prados verdeantes e inició el ascenso.

—¿Conseguiste la casa? —gritaron antes de que fuera posible oírlas.

Helen corrió al encuentro de su hermana. El camino pasaba sobre un promontorio y una vereda conducía a él en ángulos rectos sobre el borde del Down.

—¿Conseguiste la casa?

Margaret agitó la cabeza.

—¡Menuda lata! ¿Así que estamos como estábamos?

—No exactamente.

Margaret descendió. Estaba cansada.

—Un misterio —dijo Tibby—. Pronto se hará la luz.

Margaret se acercó a su hermana y le susurró que había recibido una proposición matrimonial de míster Wilcox.

Helen pareció divertida. Abrió la verja que daba a los Downs para que su hermano pudiera meter el carrito.

—Es típico de los viudos —hizo notar—. Tienen cara dura para cualquier cosa e invariablemente escogen a una amiga de la primera mujer.

La cara de Margaret reveló desesperación.

—Este tipo de... —se quedó cortada con un gritito—. Meg, ¿te ocurre algo?

—Espera un momento —dijo Margaret casi susurrando.

—Pero no habrás pensado... no habrás... —se contuvo—. ¡Tibby, date prisa! No puedo sujetar esta verja eternamente. ¡Tía Juley! Oye, tía Juley, prepara el té, por favor, y tú también, Frieda.

Margaret y yo tenemos que hablar de casas. Iré en seguida —y volviendo el rostro hacia su hermana rompió a llorar.

Margaret se quedó estupefacta. Se oyó decir a sí misma:

—Bueno, bueno... —sintió que le tocaba una mano temblorosa.

—No lo hagas —sollozó Helen—, no lo hagas, Meg, no lo hagas —parecía incapaz de decir otra cosa. Margaret, temblando a su vez, la condujo camino arriba, hasta que entraron por otra verja en el Down.

—No lo hagas, no hagas una cosa semejante. Te digo que no lo hagas. No lo hagas. Lo sé, ¡no lo hagas!

—¿Qué sabes?

—El pánico y el vacío —sollozó Helen—. ¡No lo hagas!

Margaret pensó: «Helen es un poco egoísta. Yo nunca me he comportado así cuando ella ha tenido una oportunidad de casarse.» Y dijo:

—Pero nos seguiremos viendo con frecuencia, y tú...

—No es eso —dijo Helen. Y se separó bruscamente y caminó distraída por el Down con los brazos extendidos y llorando.

—¿Qué te pasa? —le gritó Margaret siguiéndola a través del viento que se forma al atardecer en la ladera norte de las colinas—. ¡Esto es estúpido! —y, de pronto, la estupidez se hizo patente en ella y el inmenso paisaje se enturbió. Helen volvía.

—Meg...

—No sé lo que nos ha pasado —dijo Margaret enjugándose los ojos—. Hemos debido de volvernos locas.

Helen se enjugó sus lágrimas y las dos sonrieron.

—Ven, siéntate.

—Muy bien. Me sentaré si tú te sientas.

—Eso es —un beso—. Y ahora dime, ¿qué sucede?

—Ya dije lo que quería decir. No lo hagas. Yo no lo haría.

—Helen, por el amor de Dios, para ya de decir «no lo hagas». Es una muestra de ignorancia. Es como si tuvieras la cabeza metida en

el lodo. «No lo hagas» es probablemente lo que mistress Bast le está diciendo todo el día a míster Bast.

Helen seguía callada.

—¿Y bien?

—Cuéntamelo todo primero y quizá mientras tanto saque la cabeza del lodo.

—Así está mejor. Bueno, ¿por dónde empiezo? Cuando llegué a Waterloo... no, empezaré antes, porque quiero que lo sepas todo desde el principio. El «principio» fue hace diez días, cuando míster Bast vino a tomar el té y perdió el control. Yo le defendí y míster Wilcox se puso celoso por mi culpa; no mucho, un poquito nada más. Yo pensé que era algo involuntario que los hombres no pueden evitar, como no podemos nosotras. Ya sabes... al menos, en mi caso. Cuando un hombre me dice: «Fulanita de Tal es una chica muy guapa» me entra una momentánea rabia contra Fulanita de Tal y me gustaría retorcerle la oreja. Es un sentimiento molesto, pero no importante, que una puede dominar con facilidad. Pero no era sólo eso en el caso de míster Wilcox. Ahora lo comprendo.

—¿Así que tú le quieres?

Margaret reflexionó.

—Es hermoso saber que le importas realmente a alguien —dijo —. El hecho en sí ya es algo tremendo. ¿Te das cuenta? Le he conocido y me ha gustado durante casi tres años.

—Pero ¿le has querido?

Margaret escudriñó el pasado. Es agradable analizar los sentimientos mientras son sólo sentimientos, antes de entrar en la mecánica social. Con el brazo en torno a Helen, con los ojos perdidos en el paisaje, como si aquel campo u otro pudieran revelar el secreto de su corazón, meditó honradamente y dijo:

—No.

—Pero ¿lo querrás?

—Sí —dijo Margaret—, estoy segura. A decir verdad, empecé a quererle en cuanto empezó a hablar.

—¿Y has decidido casarte con él?

—Lo había decidido, pero ahora quiero discutirlo largamente contigo. ¿Qué tienes contra él, Helen? Haz un esfuerzo y dímelo.

Helen, a su vez, miró hacia delante.

—Es algo que me ocurre desde lo de Paul —dijo finalmente.

—Pero ¿qué tiene que ver míster Wilcox con Paul?

—Estaba allí; todos estaban allí aquella mañana, cuando bajé a desayunar y vi que Paul estaba aterrorizado... el hombre que me quería estaba aterrorizado y todo su ropaje había caído. Comprendí que el asunto era inviable, porque las relaciones personales son lo que importa para siempre y no la vida exterior de telegramas y furia.

Dijo toda la frase de un tirón, sin respirar, pero su hermana la entendió porque hacía referencia a ideas comunes.

—Esto es una tontería. En primer lugar, no estoy de acuerdo en lo tocante a la vida exterior. Bueno, ya lo hemos discutido un montón de veces. El quid de la cuestión es que existe una gran diferencia entre mi amor y el tuyo. Lo tuyo fue un romance; lo mío será mera prosa. No lo estoy minimizando: será buena prosa, pero reflexiva, bien pensada. Por ejemplo, yo conozco todos los defectos de míster Wilcox. Tiene miedo de las emociones. Da mucha importancia al éxito, poca al pasado. Sus sentimientos carecen de poesía; no son realmente sentimientos. Incluso me atrevería a decir —miró hacia las lagunas que centelleaban— que, espiritualmente, no es tan honesto como yo. ¿Te satisface esto?

—No —dijo Helen—. Esto me hace sentir peor aún. Debes de estar loca.

Margaret hizo un gesto de irritación.

—No pretendo que él, ni ningún hombre ni ninguna mujer colmen mi vida, ¡cielo santo, no! Hay montones de cosas en mí que él no entiende ni entenderá nunca.

Así hablaba Margaret antes de la ceremonia nupcial y de la unión física, antes de que la sorprendente campana de cristal que se interpone entre las parejas casadas y el mundo hubiera descendido. Iba a mantener su independencia más de lo que suelen mantenerla la mayoría de mujeres casadas de hoy en día. El matrimonio iba a alterar su suerte, no su carácter, y no se equivocaba al envanecerse

de conocer a su futuro esposo. Sin embargo, el matrimonio alteró su carácter un poco. Había una sorpresa imprevista, una cesación de los vientos y los olores de la vida, una presión social que le haría pensar en términos conyugales.

—Y lo mismo puedo decir con respecto a él —continuó—. Hay montones de cosas en él, especialmente cosas que él hace, que siempre quedarán ocultas para mí. Tiene todas esas cualidades públicas que tú tanto desprecias y que permiten que todo este... —señaló el paisaje, que lo corroboraba todo—. Si los Wilcox no hubiesen trabajado y muerto en Inglaterra durante miles de años, ni tú ni yo podríamos sentarnos aquí sin que alguien nos cortara la cabeza. No habría trenes, ni barcos para transportarnos a nosotros, las personas literarias. Ni campos siquiera. Sólo salvajismo. No, ni siquiera eso, quizá. Sin su coraje, tal vez la vida no habría pasado del protoplasma. Cada vez más me niego a retirar mi renta y a despreciar a los que la garantizan. Hay veces en que creo que...

—Sí, a mí también me ocurre. Y a todas las mujeres. Por eso besé a Paul.

—¡Esto es una grosería! —dijo Margaret—. Mi caso es completamente distinto. Yo he meditado bien.

—Meditar no supone ninguna diferencia. Todo acaba igual.

—¡Memeces!

Hubo un largo silencio durante el cual la marea cubrió de nuevo Poole Harbour.

—Algo se perdería —murmuró Helen, al parecer para sí misma. El agua culebreó sobre los bancos de lodo hacia las aliagas y los brezos ennegrecidos. El Frome fue empujado tierra adentro, hacia Dorchester; el Stour, contra Wimbourne; el Avon, hacia Salisbury, y sobre este inmenso desplazamiento el sol presidía, guiándolo todo hacia el triunfo antes de hundirse en el descanso. Inglaterra estaba viva, palpitaba en sus estuarios, gritaba de alegría por boca de sus gaviotas y el viento del norte, con movimiento contrario, sopló con más fuerza contra el mar ascendente. ¿Qué significaba todo aquello? ¿Qué objeto tienen sus formas hermosas, su variedad de suelos, su costa sinuosa? ¿Pertenece a los que la han moldeado y la han hecho temida por los demás países, o a los que no han añadido nada a su poder, pero la han visto, en cierto modo; a los que han

visto toda la isla en su conjunto, yacente como una joya en el mar plateado, surcándolo como un barco cargado de almas, con toda la brava flota del mundo acompañándola en su viaje a la eternidad?

CAPÍTULO XX

Margaret siempre se había maravillado de los disturbios que se producen en las aguas del mundo cuando el Amor, que parece un guijarro, se hunde en ellas. *¿A* quién le importa el Amor, salvo al amado y al amante? Y, sin embargo, su impacto inunda cientos de orillas. Este disturbio procede sin duda del espíritu de las generaciones, que saluda a la nueva generación y eleva su protesta contra el Destino, que sostiene todos los mares en la palma de la mano. Pero el Amor no lo entiende, incapaz de captar el infinito ajeno y consciente sólo del suyo: rayo de sol que surca el aire, losa que cae, guijarro que busca un dulce asiento tras el juego coordenado y convulso del espacio y el tiempo. Sabe que sobrevivirá al fin de los tiempos, que será recogido por el Destino como una joya del fango y mostrado con admiración a la asamblea de los dioses. «Los hombres produjeron esto», dirán y al decirlo concederán al hombre la inmortalidad. Pero, entre tanto, ¡cuánta agitación! Los fundamentos de la Propiedad y el Decoro quedan al desnudo, rocas gemelas; el Orgullo Familiar pugna por salir a la superficie resoplando y rehusando el consuelo; la Teología, vagamente ascética, se agita en oscuro mar de fondo. Entonces se requiere la presencia de los abogados —fría raza— que salen arrastrándose de sus agujeros. Hacen lo que pueden: asean la Propiedad y el Decoro, tranquilizan a la Teología y al Orgullo Familiar. Se arrojan montones de medias guineas a las aguas turbulentas, los abogados se retiran a rastras y, si todo ha ido bien, el Amor une a un hombre y una mujer en Matrimonio.

Margaret esperaba este trastorno y no se incomodó. Para ser una mujer sensible, tenía los nervios firmes y podía soportar lo incongruente y lo grotesco. Además, no había nada excesivo en su

episodio sentimental. El buen humor era la nota dominante en sus relaciones con míster Wilcox o, como ya podemos llamarle, con Henry. Henry no era hombre dado al romanticismo y Margaret no era tan niña como para reclamar un capricho semejante. Un amigo se había convertido en novio y podía convertirse en marido, pero sin perder lo que había en el amigo. El Amor debía confirmar una vieja relación en lugar de crear una nueva.

En este estado de ánimo, Margaret prometió casarse con él.

Henry había ido a Swanage aquella mañana llevando consigo el anillo de pedida. Se saludaron con una cordialidad tan sincera que impresionó a la tía Juley. Henry cenó en «Los Laureles», pero había tomado una habitación en el mejor hotel de la localidad con ese instinto que poseen algunas personas para detectar a primera vista el mejor hotel. Acabada la cena, preguntó a Margaret si tenía inconveniente en dar una vuelta por el Paseo Marítimo. Margaret aceptó y no pudo reprimir un leve temor: aquélla sería su primera escena de amor. Pero cuando se estaba poniendo el sombrero, soltó la carcajada. El amor no se parecía en nada a ese artículo que se vende en los libros; la alegría, si bien auténtica, era distinta; el misterio, un misterio inesperado. Por algún motivo, míster Wilcox aún le parecía un extraño.

Durante un rato hablaron del anillo. Luego dijo Margaret:

—¿Recuerdas el Chelsea Embankment? No hace ni diez días de aquello.

—Sí —dijo él riendo—. Tu hermana y tú estabais enzarzadas en un proyecto quijotesco.

—¡Qué poco pensaba entonces en esto! ¿Y tú?

—No sé; no sé qué decirte.

—¿Fue antes? —exclamó Margaret—. ¿Pensabas en mí antes de este modo? ¡Qué interesante, Henry! Cuéntame.

Pero Henry no tenía la menor intención de contar nada. Quizá no habría podido contar nada, porque sus estados mentales se volvían oscuros tan pronto habían pasado. Le disgustaba la palabra «interesante», porque le sugería pérdida de energías no exenta de morbosidad. Los hechos pelados le bastaban.

—Yo no pensaba en esto —prosiguió ella—. No, cuando me hablaste en el salón fue prácticamente la primera vez. ¡Y todo resultó tan distinto de lo que normalmente se supone! En el teatro y en los libros una proposición matrimonial es, ¿cómo te diría? es una cuestión de suspiros, una especie de ramillete; pierde todo su sentido literal. Pero en la vida, una proposición matrimonial es realmente una proposición...

—Por cierto...

—...una sugerencia, una semilla —concluyó Margaret y la idea se desvaneció en la oscuridad.

—Estaba pensando que, si no hay inconveniente por tu parte, deberíamos tener una conversación de negocios. Hay que dejar bien sentadas muchas cosas.

—Eso creo yo también. Antes de nada, dime, ¿qué tal te fue con Tibby?

—¿Con tu hermano?

—Sí, mientras fumabais después de cenar.

—Ah, muy bien.

—Me alegro —contestó ella un poco sorprendida—. ¿De qué hablasteis? De mí, supongo.

—Y también de Grecia.

—Grecia fue una buena baza, Henry. Tibby es sólo un muchacho, hay que saber escoger los temas de conversación. Hiciste bien.

—Le conté que tengo acciones en una fábrica de pasas cerca de Calamata.

—¡Oh, qué sitio tan estupendo para tener acciones! ¿No podríamos ir a pasar allí nuestra luna de miel?

—¿Para qué?

—Para comernos las pasas. ¿No es un lugar maravilloso?

—Moderadamente maravilloso, pero no es un lugar a donde pueda ir con una dama.

—¿Por qué?

—No hay hoteles.

—Algunas damas pueden pasarse sin hoteles. ¿Sabías que Helen y yo hemos ido solas y a pie por los Apeninos con el equipaje a la espalda?

—No, no lo sabía y, si puedo evitarlo, no volverás a hacer una cosa semejante.

Margaret dijo con más seriedad:

—Supongo que no habrás encontrado ocasión de hablar con Helen.

—No.

—Hazlo antes de irte. ¡Me gustaría tanto que fuerais amigos!

—Tu hermana y yo siempre nos hemos llevado bien —dijo él con negligencia—. Pero nos estamos apartando de nuestros negocios. Déjame empezar por el principio. Ya sabes que Evie se va a casar con Percy Cahill.

—El tío de Dolly.

—Exacto. La chica está locamente enamorada de él. Es un muchacho estupendo, pero quiere, y hace bien, una dote razonable. En segundo lugar, tú lo comprenderás, está Charles. Antes de venir le escribí una carta muy cuidadosa. Tiene una familia que va en aumento y unos gastos que aumentan en la misma proporción. La I.W.A. no es nada del otro mundo, hoy por hoy, aunque tiene grandes posibilidades de ir para arriba.

—¡Pobre chico! —murmuró Margaret contemplando el mar sin entender.

—Charles, como primogénito que es, heredará algún día Howards End. Sin embargo, yo deseo por mi propia felicidad no ser injusto con los otros.

—Por supuesto que no... —empezó a decir Margaret y, de pronto, profirió un gritito—. ¡Te refieres al dinero! ¡Qué tonta soy! ¡Por supuesto que no!

Por extraño que parezca, Henry pareció molesto al oír esta palabra.

—Sí, dinero, ya que lo dices con tanta claridad. Verás, tengo la intención de ser justo con todos: justo contigo y justo con ellos. Estoy decidido a que mis hijos no puedan quejarse de mí.

—Sé generoso con ellos —dijo ella vivamente— ¡y al cuerno la justicia!

—Ya he tomado una determinación y he escrito a Charles en este sentido...

—Pero, vamos a ver, ¿cuánto tienes?

—¿Qué?

—Sí, ¿cuánto ingresas al año? Yo, seiscientas libras.

—¿Mis ingresos?

—Claro. Hemos de empezar por tus ingresos antes de decidir cuánto vamos a darle a Charles. La justicia e incluso la generosidad dependen de eso.

—La verdad es que eres una mujer bien franca —observó él dándole unos golpecitos en el brazo y prorrumpiendo en una suave risa—. ¡Vaya pregunta!

—¿No sabes cuáles son tus ingresos? ¿O no me lo quieres decir?

—Yo...

—Está bien —dijo Margaret dándole a su vez unos golpecitos—, no me lo digas. No quiero saberlo. Puedo hacer la suma por simple proporción. Divide tus ingresos en diez partes. ¿Cuántas partes le darías a Evie, cuántas a Charles y cuántas a Paul?

—La verdad, querida, es que no tenía intención de aburrirte entrando en detalles. Yo sólo quería que supieras... en fin, que hay que hacer algo por los demás. Me has entendido perfectamente, así que pasemos al punto siguiente.

—Sí, ya hemos decidido este punto —dijo Margaret imperturbable ante las torpes estrategias de Henry—. Adelante, da todo lo que puedas y ten presente que yo recibo seiscientas libras limpias. ¿Para qué quiero yo todo este dinero?

—No creas que yo tengo mucho; te vas a casar con un hombre pobre.

—Helen no estaría de acuerdo conmigo a este respecto —continuó ella—. Helen no se atreve a insultar a los ricos, puesto que ella lo es, pero le gustaría hacerlo. Tiene una extraña idea, que yo todavía no he podido alcanzar y que le da vueltas en la cabeza, según la cual la pobreza es en cierto modo algo «auténtico». Le molesta la organización y probablemente confunde la riqueza con la técnica de la riqueza. No le importan las monedas guardadas en un calcetín, pero le molestan los cheques. Helen es excesivamente rígida. No se puede ir por el mundo con estas ideas fijas.

—Un punto más y me vuelvo al hotel a escribir unas cartas. ¿Qué hacemos con la casa de Ducie Street?

—Consérvala... es decir, depende. ¿Cuándo quieres casarte conmigo?

Había levantado la voz, como de costumbre, y unos jóvenes que habían salido a tomar el fresco la oyeron.

—Esto se pone bueno, ¿eh, tú? —dijo uno.

Míster Wilcox se volvió y dijo vivamente:

—¡Oiga usted! —hubo un silencio—. Tenga cuidado que no avise a la policía.

Los jóvenes se separaron tranquilamente, pero sólo lo hicieron en espera de otra oportunidad y el resto de la conversación estuvo punteado de ráfagas de risa incontrolada.

Bajando la voz e introduciendo en ella un punto de reproche, Henry dijo:

—Evie se casará probablemente en septiembre. Antes de esa fecha no podemos pensar en nada.

—Cuanto antes mejor, Henry. Las mujeres no debemos decir esto, pero cuanto antes mejor.

—¿Qué tal el mismo septiembre? —preguntó él con cierta sequedad.

—Bien. ¿Iremos a Ducie Street en septiembre? ¿O metemos allí a Helen y a Tibby? Esto último me parece una buena idea. Son dos inútiles en este aspecto, podríamos hacer algo por ellos actuando juiciosamente. Mira, ya está. Eso haremos. Y nosotros podemos vivir en Howards End o en Shropshire.

Míster Wilcox dio un resoplido.

—¡Cielo santo! ¡Qué aprisa vais las mujeres! Me da vueltas la cabeza. Paso a paso, Margaret, paso a paso. Howards End, imposible. Se lo arrendé a Hamar Bryce por tres años, ¿recuerdas? Sigamos. Oniton. No, está demasiado lejos para instalarnos definitivamente. Resistirías un cierto tiempo, pero hemos de tener una casa al alcance de la ciudad. El problema es que Ducie Street tiene grandes desventajas. Hay una cuadra en la parte trasera.

Margaret soltó una carcajada irreprimible. Era la primera vez que oía hablar de la cuadra en la parte trasera de Ducie Street. Cuando ella era una posible inquilina, este hecho había desaparecido inconsciente pero automáticamente. El modo de actuar de veleta de míster Wilcox, si bien sincero, carecía de la claridad de visión imperativa para la verdad. Como habitante de Ducie Street, Henry recordaba la cuadra; como arrendador, la olvidaba y si alguien le hubiera dicho que la cuadra estaba siempre o no estaba nunca, se habría molestado y habría encontrado alguna manera de anatematizar a su interlocutor tachándole de academicista. Del mismo modo mi tendero me anatematiza cuando me quejo de la calidad de sus pasas de Corinto y me contesta en una sola frase que sus pasas de Corinto son las mejores y que cómo quiero yo buenas pasas de Corinto a ese precio. Es un defecto inherente a la mentalidad mercantil y Margaret debería sentir ternura por ella, teniendo en cuenta lo mucho que esta mentalidad ha hecho por Inglaterra.

—Sí, sobre todo en verano la cuadra es una porquería. El salón de fumar es un cuchitril abominable. La casa de enfrente la tienen alquilada unos cantantes de ópera. Ducie Street ya es un desastre, en mi opinión.

—¡Qué lástima, con el poco tiempo que llevan construidas esas casas tan bonitas!

—Esto demuestra que las cosas cambian. Bueno para el comercio.

—Odio este continuo flujo de Londres. Es una síntesis de nosotros mismos en lo peor que tenemos: la eterna carencia de forma. Todas las cualidades buenas, malas e indiferentes pasan,

pasan para siempre. Por eso me horroriza. Desconfío de los ríos, incluso en el paisaje. En cambio el mar...

—Sí, hay marea alta.

—Sí, hay marea alta.

—Ma-ea a-ta —les llegó de los jóvenes paseantes.

—Y a estos tipos les estamos dando el derecho de voto —observó míster Wilcox omitiendo que aquellos eran los tipos a los que él empleaba en sus oficinas, en un trabajo que no contribuía precisamente a desarrollar sus cualidades—. En fin, tienen sus propias vidas y sus propios intereses. Dejémoslos.

Dio media vuelta mientras hablaba y se dispuso a acompañar a Margaret de vuelta a «Los Laureles». El negocio había terminado. El hotel se encontraba en dirección opuesta y, si la acompañaba, las cartas llegarían tarde al correo. Margaret le rogó que no fuera, pero él se puso terco.

—¡Bonito principio, si tu tía te ve llegar sola!

—Siempre voy sola a todas partes. No tiene nada de particular, teniendo en cuenta que he recorrido los Apeninos a pie. Me enfadaré contigo si me acompañas. No lo tomes como un cumplido.

Henry se rió y encendió un cigarro.

—No pretendía hacer cumplidos, querida. Es que no te dejo ir sola en esta oscuridad. ¡Y con esta gente por aquí! Muy peligroso.

—No sé cuidar de mí misma, ¿eh? Quiero...

—Vamos, Margaret, nada de caprichitos.

Una chica más joven se habría molestado por sus modales autoritarios, pero Margaret tenía las ideas lo suficientemente claras como para no hacer tonterías. A su manera, ella era tan autoritaria como él. Si él era una fortaleza, ella era la cima de una montaña: todos podían hollarla, pero la nieve le hacía recuperar cada noche su virginidad. Desdeñosa de las apariencias heroicas, excitable en sus métodos, charlatana, episódica y chillona, había engañado a su prometido como había engañado a su tía. Henry había tomado su fecundidad de espíritu por debilidad; la suponía «tan inteligente como todos la creen, pero no más», sin comprender que ella

penetraba en las profundidades de su alma y aprobaba lo que encontraba allí.

Si la vida interior fuera suficiente, si lo fuera todo, la felicidad de ambos estaría asegurada.

Caminaron aprisa. El Paseo Marítimo y el camino que lo continuaba estaban bien iluminados, pero en el jardín de la tía Juley reinaba la oscuridad. Cuando lo estaba cruzando por un sendero, a través de los rododendros, míster Wilcox, que iba delante, dijo: «Margaret» con voz ronca, se volvió, dejó caer el cigarro y la tomó en sus brazos.

Margaret se asustó y estuvo a punto de gritar, pero se recobró al instante y besó con auténtico amor los labios que se apretaban contra los suyos. Era su primer beso. Cuando hubo concluido, él la llevó hasta la puerta, tocó el timbre y desapareció en la noche antes de que la doncella respondiera. Recordando el incidente, Margaret se sintió a disgusto. Era demasiado aislado. Nada en la conversación previa lo había anunciado y, peor aún, ninguna ternura lo había seguido. Si un hombre no sabe elevarse hasta la pasión, siempre le queda la posibilidad de acabarla y ella esperaba, después de su entrega, un intercambio de palabras tiernas. Pero él se había retirado aprisa, como si estuviese avergonzado y por un instante pasó por la mente de Margaret la imagen de Helen y Paul.

CAPÍTULO XXI

Charles había estado regañando a Dolly. La pobre se merecía el rapapolvo y lo aceptó como justo, pero su cabeza humildemente inclinada no se sometía, y sus gorjeos empezaron a mezclarse con la tormenta apenas ésta comenzó a amainar.

—Has despertado al niño. Estaba segura de que lo despertarías. A rorró, a rorró. Yo no tengo ninguna culpa de lo que haga mi tío Percy, ni nadie, ¡no faltaría más!

—Conque no, ¿eh? ¿Y quién le invitó mientras yo estaba fuera? ¿Quién invitó a mi hermana para que lo conociera? ¿Quién los envió a pasear en coche día tras día?

—Charles, esto me recuerda un poema.

—¿Ah, sí? Pues ahora bailaremos al compás de una música distinta. Miss Schlegel nos tiene a todos en un puño.

—Lo único que puedo hacer es sacarle los ojos a esa mujer, pero de ahí a decir que es culpa mía... me parece completamente injusto.

—Es culpa tuya, y hace cinco meses lo admitías.

—No es verdad.

—Sí, lo admitías.

—Duérmete, niño, duérmete ya —exclamó Dolly repentinamente dedicada al niño.

—Muy bonito, desvías la conversación, pero papá jamás habría soñado en casarse mientras Evie estuviera con él para hacerle compañía. Pero, claro, tú tenías que meterte a casamentera. Además, Cahill es un viejo.

—Ah, muy bien, ahora vas a ser grosero con el tío Percy...

—Miss Schlegel siempre ha tenido entre ceja y ceja quedarse con Howards End y ahora, gracias a ti, ya lo ha conseguido.

—Esta manera tuya de retorcer las cosas y hacerlas coincidir es de lo más injusto. No te habrías comportado con más grosería si me hubieras visto galanteando con otro. ¿Verdad, ricura?

—Estamos en un aprieto y hay que hacer lo que se pueda. Contestaré la carta de papá procurando ser comedido. Está deseoso de hacer las cosas bien. Pero no pienso olvidarme de esas Schlegel en un abrir y cerrar de ojos. Mientras se comporten correctamente, ¿me oyes, Dolly?, mientras se comporten correctamente, nosotros nos portaremos bien. Pero si me entero de que se les suben los humos, si intentan monopolizar a papá, si le tratan mal o le dan la lata con sus bestialidades artísticas, me van a oír, ya lo creo que sí. ¡Ocupar el lugar de mi madre! ¡Dios sabe lo que dirá el pobre Paul cuando se entere de las novedades!

El interludio toca a su fin. Ha tenido lugar en el jardín de la casa de Charles, en Hilton. Dolly y él están sentados en sendos canapés y el coche los mira con placidez desde su garaje, al otro extremo del parterre. Una edición reducida de una canastilla que berrea, y para dentro de poco se espera la tercera edición. La naturaleza fabrica nuevos Wilcox en su pacífica mansión para que puedan heredar la tierra.

CAPÍTULO XXII

Margaret saludó a su prometido con peculiar ternura aquella mañana. Aunque ya era un hombre maduro, ella le ayudaría a construir el arco iris, el puente que une en nuestro interior la prosa con la pasión. Sin ese puente somos fragmentos sin sentido, mitad monos, mitad bestias, piezas inconexas que no logran formar un hombre. Con el puente, nace el amor, brilla en su cénit, luminoso frente al gris, austero frente al fuego. Feliz el hombre que ve bajo los dos aspectos la belleza de estas alas desplegadas. Los caminos de su alma están libres y él y sus amigos encontrarán la ruta fácil.

La ruta era difícil por los caminos del alma de míster Wilcox. Desde la infancia los había despreciado. «No soy hombre que se preocupe de su interior.» Por fuera había sido alegre, honrado y valiente, pero en su interior todo era caos, un caos gobernado, si es que existía gobierno alguno, por su ascetismo incompleto. Tanto cuando era muchacho como cuando era marido o viudo, había alimentado la tortuosa creencia de que la pasión corporal es mala, una creencia que sólo es útil cuando se mantiene apasionadamente. La religión le había confirmado en su certidumbre. Las palabras que el domingo le leían en voz alta a él y a otros hombres respetables eran las palabras que en su día habían encendido las almas de Santa Catalina y de San Francisco en el odio a todo lo carnal. Míster Wilcox no era un santo, no era capaz de amar lo infinito con amor seráfico, pero sí lo era de avergonzarse de amar a su mujer. «Amabat, amare timebat.» Y ahí era donde Margaret confiaba en ayudarle.

No parecía difícil. No era necesario agobiarle con la entrega de sí misma. Se limitaría a señalarle la salvación, cuya raíz se hallaba latente en su propia alma, en el alma de todos los hombres. ¡Sólo

construir el puente! Ese era todo el sermón. Sólo construir un puente entre la prosa y la pasión y ambas resurgirían y el amor humano brillaría en su cima. No más vida fragmentaria. Sólo construir el puente y la bestia y el mono, alejados del aislamiento que les da vida, morirían.

El mensaje no era difícil de dar. No era preciso que revistiera la forma de una buena «charla». Por medio de leves indicaciones se construiría el puente y sus vidas se cubrirían de belleza.

Pero fracasó. Porque había una cualidad en Henry que siempre la pillaba desprevenida por mucho que intentara tenerla presente: la necedad. No entendía las cosas, y contra eso no había nada que hacer. Nunca se enteró de que Helen y Frieda le eran hostiles, ni de que a Tibby no le interesaban las plantaciones de uvas pasas; nunca vislumbró las luces y sombras que existen en la más neutra de las conversaciones, los postes indicadores, los mojones, las colisiones, los espacios ilimitados. Una vez —en otra ocasión— Margaret le reprendió por ello. Él se quedó desconcertado, pero replicó con una carcajada: «Mi lema es: concentración. No tengo la menor intención de despreciar mis energías en estas cosas.» «No se trata de desperdiciar energías —protestó Margaret—, sino de ampliar el campo en el que puedas emplearlas.» Y él contestó: «Eres una mujercita muy lista, pero mi lema es: concentración.» Y aquella mañana se concentró más de lo normal en venganza.

Se encontraron en los rododendros de la noche anterior. A la luz del día los arbustos eran insignificantes y el sendero brillaba al sol matutino. Margaret estaba con Helen, que permanecía agoreramente tranquila desde que el asunto quedó decidido.

—¡Ya estamos todos! —gritó Margaret y le tomó de la mano, reteniendo la de su hermana en la otra.

—Sí, aquí estamos. Buenos días, Helen.

—Buenos días, míster Wilcox —respondió Helen.

—Henry, Helen ha recibido una carta encantadora de aquel muchacho tan raro y tan furibundo, ¿recuerdas? Aquel que tenía un bigote triste y un cerebro joven.

—Yo también he recibido una carta. No una carta encantadora, precisamente... Quiero comentarla contigo —Leonard Bast no existía

para él después de su compromiso con Margaret; el triángulo amoroso quedaba roto para siempre.

—Gracias a tus consejos se ha ido de la Porphyrion.

—Buena compañía, la Porphyrion —dijo él con aire distraído mientras sacaba su carta del bolsillo.

—¿Buena? —exclamó Margaret soltando su mano—. Pero en el Chelsea Embankment...

—Aquí está nuestra anfitriona. Buenos días, mistress Munt.

Hermosos rododendros. Buenos días, frau Liesecke. Tenemos buenas flores en Inglaterra, ¿verdad?

—¿Una buena compañía?

—Sí. Mi carta se refiere a Howards End. Bryce tiene que irse al extranjero y quiere subarrendarlo. Dudo mucho que le dé autorización. No había cláusula ce subarriendo en el contrato. En mi opinión, subarrendar es una equivocación. Si puede encontrar otro arrendatario que sea de mi agrado, estoy conforme en rescindir el contrato. Despiértese, Schlegel, ¿no cree que esto sería mejor que subarrendarlo?

Helen, a su vez, había soltado su mano y él condujo a Margaret más allá del grupo, hacia el lado de la casa que daba al mar. A sus pies se extendía la burguesa bahía que había esperado durante siglos un balneario como Swanage en su ribera. Las olas eran incoloras y el río Bournemouth daba un toque de insipidez al conjunto, chocando contra el espigón y ululando salvajemente para atraer a los excursionistas.

—Cuando se subarrienda, el perjuicio...

—Perdona, pero, volviendo a la Porphyrion, no estoy tranquila. ¿Puedo importunarte, Henry?

Su tono de voz era tan serio que él se calló y le preguntó, un poco secamente, qué quería.

—Tú dijiste en el Chelsea Embankment, me acuerdo perfectamente, que la Porphyrion era un mal negocio, así que advertimos a aquel empleado para que la dejase. Esta mañana me escribe diciendo que ha seguido tu consejo y ahora dices que no es un mal asunto.

—Un empleado que deja cualquier trabajo, bueno o malo, sin asegurarse antes otro en otro sitio, es un tonto y no siento ninguna lástima por él.

—Pero si ya lo ha hecho. Va a entrar en un Banco de Camden Town, según dice. El sueldo es mucho menor, pero espera apañarse. Es una agencia del Dempster's Bank. ¿Es bueno?

—¡El Dempster! Madre mía, ya lo creo.

—¿Mejor que la Porphyrion?

—Sí, sí, sí; tan sólido como una roca. Más aún.

—Muchísimas gracias. Y perdona. ¿Qué decías del subarriendo?

—Si subarrienda, perderé el control. En teoría, eso no perjudicaría a Howards End, pero en la práctica, sí. Hay cosas que no pueden compensarse con dinero. Por ejemplo, no quiero que estropeen aquel precioso olmo... Está... Margaret, hemos de ir a verlo un día de estos. Es muy bonito, a su manera. Iremos en coche y comeremos en casa de Charles.

—Me encantará —dijo Margaret haciendo acopio de valor.

—¿Te parece bien el próximo miércoles?

—¿El miércoles? No, no puedo. La tía Juley espera que nos quedemos una semana más, por lo menos.

—Puedes arreglarlo ahora mismo.

—N... no —dijo Margaret después de un rato de reflexión.

—Sí, mujer. Yo hablaré con ella.

—Esta visita es una gran solemnidad. Mi tía cuenta con ella cada año. Pone la casa patas arriba por nosotros, invita a nuestros amigos; fíjate, apenas conoce a Frieda y no podemos dejarla sola con ella. Ya perdí un día y le dolería mucho que no estuviera los diez días completos.

—Ya hablaré yo con ella, no te preocupes.

—Henry, no iré, no me atosigues.

—¿Quieres o no quieres ver la casa?

—Sí, claro... He oído hablar tanto de ella en uno y otro sentido... ¿Todavía están aquellos dientes de cerdo clavados en el

olmo?

—*¿Dientes de cerdo?*

—Sí. Y tú chupabas la corteza para curarte el dolor de muelas.

—¡Qué idea más peregrina! ¡Por supuesto que no!

—Quizá lo confundo con otro árbol. Todavía quedan muchos árboles sagrados en Inglaterra, al parecer.

Pero él ya la había abandonado para interceptar a mistress Munt cuya voz se oía a distancia, siendo a su vez interceptado por Helen.

—Oiga, míster Wilcox, hablando de la Porphyrion... —empezó y se puso roja hasta la raíz del cabello.

—Déjalo —dijo Margaret alcanzándolos—. El Dempster's Bank es mejor.

—Pero creo que usted nos dijo que la Porphyrion iba mal y que se hundiría antes de Navidad.

—¿Eso dije? Por entonces estaba fuera del grupo y tenía que tomar serias medidas. Luego salió a flote... Tan sólida como una roca ahora.

—En otras palabras: míster Bast no tenía por qué dejarla.

—No, no tenía por qué.

—...y no tenía por qué haber empezado una nueva vida en otro sitio con un sueldo muchísimo menor.

—Él sólo dice «menor» —corrigió Margaret viendo que se avecinaban problemas.

—Cuando un hombre es pobre, cualquier reducción resulta enorme. Considero este asunto una desgracia deplorable.

Míster Wilcox, empeñado en su asunto con mistress Munt, ya se estaba yendo, pero aquella última observación le hizo decir:

—¿Qué? ¿De qué se trata? ¿Quiere usted decir que yo soy el responsable?

—Esto es ridículo, Helen.

—Al parecer cree usted... —consultó su reloj—. Déjeme que le explique a usted este punto. Es así. Usted parece suponer que cuando una entidad comercial lleva a cabo una negociación delicada

tiene que tener al público informado paso a paso. La Porphyrion, según usted, tenía que haber dicho: «Hago lo que puedo para entrar en el grupo. No estoy segura de conseguirlo, pero es lo único que puede salvarme de la quiebra y lo intento.» Querida Helen...

—¿Es éste su punto de vista? Bien. Un hombre tenía poco dinero, ahora tiene menos, éste es mi punto de vista.

—Lo siento por su oficinista, pero esto ocurre cada día en el mundo del trabajo. Es parte de la lucha por la vida.

—Un hombre tenía poco dinero —repitió Helen— y ahora tiene menos gracias a usted. Bajo estas circunstancias, yo creo que «la lucha por la vida» es una expresión poco afortunada.

—Vamos, vamos —protestó él en tono de broma—. No se sienta culpable. Nadie tiene la culpa.

—¿Nadie tiene nunca la culpa de nada?

—Yo no dije esto, pero se lo toma usted demasiado en serio. ¿Quién es ese chico?

—Ya le hemos hablado de ese chico dos veces —dijo Helen—. Usted incluso ha conocido al chico. Es muy pobre y su mujer es una extravagante idiota. Él es capaz de algo mejor. Nosotros... nosotros... las clases altas... creímos que podríamos ayudarle desde la cúspide de nuestra superior sabiduría... ¡y éste ha sido el resultado!

—Le voy a dar un consejo —dijo él levantando el dedo.

—No he pedido ningún consejo.

—Un consejo. No tome una actitud sentimental con respecto a los pobres. Procura que no lo haga, Margaret. Los pobres son pobres y todos lo lamentamos, pero así es. Cuando una civilización avanza, es probable que los zapatos duelan y es absurdo pretender que alguien se responsabilice personalmente. Ni usted, ni yo, ni la persona que me informó, ni el director de la Porphyrion; nadie es responsable por la pérdida de sueldo de este oficinista. Es sólo el zapato que duele... Nadie puede evitarlo, y podría haber sido peor aún.

Helen estaba trémula de indignación.

—Me parece bien que se dedique usted a obras de caridad... Dedíquese a ellas con todo su empeño, pero no siga con esas absurdas ideas de reforma social. Yo creo lo que ocurre entre bastidores y puede creerme si le digo que no hay tal cuestión social... excepto para unos cuantos periodistas que intentan ganarse la vida exprimiendo una frase. Sólo hay ricos y pobres, como siempre ha habido y siempre habrá. Dígame usted una época en que los hombres hayan sido iguales...

—Yo no dije...

—Dígame una época en que el deseo de igualdad les haya hecho más dichosos. No, no. No puede. Siempre ha habido ricos y pobres. Yo no soy fatalista, ¡Dios me libre!, pero nuestra civilización está moldeada por grandes fuerzas impersonales —su voz se tornó complaciente; siempre ocurría así cuando eliminaba las cuestiones personales— y siempre habrá ricos y pobres. No lo puede negar —ahora era una voz respetable— ...y no puede negar que, a pesar de todo, la tendencia de la civilización considerada en su conjunto es avanzar y mejorar.

—Por la gracia de Dios, supongo —replicó Helen.

Él la miró con ira.

—Uno lucha por el dinero. Dios hace el resto.

No valía la pena dar consejos a la chica si estaba dispuesta a hablar de Dios de aquella manera moderna y neurótica. Fraternal hasta el fin, la dejó para ir en busca de la compañía más tranquila de mistress Munt. Iba pensando: «Me recuerda mucho a Dolly.»

Helen se puso a mirar al mar.

—No discutas nunca de economía política con Henry —le aconsejó su hermana—. Siempre terminaréis a gritos.

—Debe de ser uno de esos hombres que han reconciliado la ciencia con la religión —dijo Helen lentamente—. No me gustan esa clase de hombres. Son científicos y hablan de la supervivencia del más apto. Reducen los sueldos de sus empleados, coartan la libertad de los que pueden amenazar su confort, pero creen que de todo ello se derivará un bien por alguna extraña razón (siempre esta odiosa vaguedad) y que de un modo místico los Bast del futuro se beneficiarán de que los Bast de hoy día sufran.

—Es así en teoría. Pero sólo en teoría, Helen.

—Sí, Meg, ¡pero qué teoría tan horrorosa!

—¿Por qué dices las cosas con tanta dureza, querida?

—Porque soy una vieja solterona —dijo Helen mordiéndose los labios—. No comprendo cómo puedo seguir siendo así —se sacudió la mano de su hermana y entró en la casa. Margaret, acongojada de buena mañana, siguió el curso del Bournemouth con los ojos. Vio que los nervios de Helen estaban exasperados por el desafortunado asunto de Bast más allá de los límites de la cortesía. En cualquier momento podía producirse una explosión que incluso Henry notaría. Había que sacar a Henry de allí.

—¡Margaret! —la llamó su tía—. ¡Magy! ¿Verdad que no es cierto lo que dice míster Wilcox, que te quieres ir a principios de la semana que viene?

—No *quiero* —respondió Margaret con prontitud—, pero hemos de resolver muchas cosas y quiero hablar con Charles.

—¿Y te vas a ir sin hacer la excursión a Weymouth, ni la de Lulworth, por lo menos? —dijo mistress Munt acercándose—. ¿Sin ir ni siquiera una vez más a Nine Barrows Down?

—Me temo que sí.

Míster Wilcox terció con un:

—¡Bueno! Ya rompí el hielo.

Una oleada de ternura invadió a Margaret. Puso las manos en los hombros de Henry y le miró al fondo de los ojos negros y brillantes. ¿Qué había tras aquella mirada competente? Margaret lo sabía, pero no se sentía inquieta.

CAPÍTULO XXIII

Margaret no tenía la menor intención de dejar las cosas como estaban y la noche anterior a su marcha de Swanage reprendió a su hermana. No le censuró el que desaprobase su boda, sino el haber arrojado sobre su desaprobación un velo de misterio. Helen se mostró igualmente sincera.

—Sí —dijo con el aire del que mira hacia su propio interior—, hay un misterio. No lo puedo evitar. No es culpa mía. La vida es así.

Helen, por aquel entonces, estaba muy interesada en el subconsciente. Exageraba comparando la vida con Punch y Juddy [10] y considerando a los individuos marionetas que un titiritero invisible empuja al amor y a la guerra. Margaret le indicó que de seguir obcecada en aquella postura, eliminaría también el elemento personal. Helen guardó silencio un instante y luego prorrumpió en una extraña perorata que clarificó la atmósfera.

—Ve y cásate con él. Eres una persona espléndida; si alguien puede tener éxito en esta empresa, eres tú —Margaret negaba que hubiera alguna empresa en la que «tener éxito», pero Helen continuó—: Sí, sí la hay. Yo no lo pude conseguir con Paul. Yo sólo puedo hacer las cosas que resultan fáciles. Sólo puedo inducir y ser inducida. No puedo ni quiero emprender relaciones difíciles. Si me caso, será con un hombre lo bastante fuerte como para dominarme y lo bastante débil como para que yo le domine. Y como estos hombres no existen, no me casaré nunca. Y que Dios ampare al que se case conmigo, porque estoy segura de que huiré de su lado en menos que canta un gallo. Porque sí. Porque soy un ser ineducado. Pero tú eres diferente; tú eres una heroína.

—¿De veras, Helen? ¿Tan terrible será para el pobre Henry?

—Tú quieres guardar las proporciones y esto es heroico, es griego, y no veo por qué no puedes tener éxito. Ve, lucha con él y ayúdale. No me pidas ayuda, ni siquiera compasión. De ahora en adelante pienso seguir mi propio camino. Pienso ser lo que soy, porque es fácil ser lo que uno es. Tu marido me disgusta, no haré nada para remediarlo y pienso decírselo a la cara. No pienso hacer concesiones a Tibby. Si Tibby quiere vivir conmigo, tendrá que soportarme tal como soy. Pienso quererte más que nunca. Sí. Tú y yo hemos edificado algo real, real porque es puramente espiritual. Con nosotras no hay velo de misterio. La irrealidad y el misterio empiezan donde empieza lo corporal. El sentir popular, como de costumbre, es el opuesto. Nuestras preocupaciones versan sobre cosas tangibles: dinero, maridos, casas. El Cielo hará su labor sin nosotras.

Margaret le agradeció aquella manifestación de afecto y contestó: «Quizá.» Todas las perspectivas se cierran en lo invisible, nadie lo duda, pero para Helen se cerraban, a su entender, demasiado pronto. En cada frase salía la realidad y lo absoluto. Quizá Margaret se había vuelto vieja para la metafísica o quizá Henry le había hecho perder parte de su primitivo interés, pero creyó que había algo desequilibrado en una mente que con tanta facilidad hacía añicos lo visible. El hombre de negocios presupone que la vida lo es todo: el místico afirma que no es nada; ni uno ni otro dan en la verdad. «Sí, querida, ya veo: la verdad está en el medio», habría aventurado la tía Juley unos años antes. No; la verdad, como todo lo que está vivo, no está a mitad de camino de nada. Hay que encontrarla mediante continuas excursiones a uno y otro reino, porque, si bien la proporción es la clave final, partir de ella es garantís de fracaso.

Helen, unas veces corroborando, otras discrepando, habría seguido discutiendo hasta la medianoche, pero Margaret, que tenía que hacer el equipaje, centró la conversación en Henry. Helen podía meterse con él a sus espaldas, pero ¿tendría la bondad de comportarse educadamente cuando estuviera presente?

—Me disgusta sin remisión, pero haré lo que pueda —prometió Helen—. A cambio, haz lo que quieras con mis amigos.

La conversación hizo que Margaret se sintiera mejor. Su vida interior estaba tan segura que podía negociar con las cosas externas

de un modo que habría parecido increíble a la tía Juley e imposible a Tibby o a Charles. Hay momentos en que la vida interior «compensa», en que los años de introspección practicada sin ulterior motivo adquieren utilidad práctica. Estos momentos, hoy por hoy, son escasos en Occidente. El hecho de que se produzcan alguna vez permite aventurar un futuro mejor. Margaret, aunque incapaz de entender a su hermana, quedaba a salvo del extrañamiento y regresó a Londres con la mente serena.

A la mañana siguiente, a las siete en punto, se presentó en las oficinas de la Imperial and West African Rubber Company [11]. Se alegró de ir allí. Henry siempre había eludido el tema de su trabajo por considerarlo demasiado obvio para describirlo detalladamente y la idea informe y vaga que todos tenemos del continente africano no había hecho más que oscurecer las ideas de Margaret sobre la principal fuente de riqueza de aquellas tierras. La visita a las oficinas no le aclaró mucho las cosas. Encontró la típica ebullición superficial de libros de contabilidad y mostradores bruñidos, barras de metal que empezaban y acababan sin razón aparente, globos eléctricos que brillaban agrupados de tres en tres, pequeñas conejeras cubiertas de cristal o tela metálica, pequeños conejos. Ni siquiera cuando penetró en las profundidades encontró más que la ordinaria mesa y la alfombra persa, y si bien el mapa desplegado sobre la chimenea mostraba una porción de África, era un mapa ordinario. Otro mapa colgaba enfrente y representaba todo el continente, como una ballena señalada para obtener grasa. A su lado había una puerta cerrada a través de la cual le llegó la voz de Henry dictando una carta «dura». Margaret tanto podía estar en la Porphyrion como en el Dempster's Bank o en su bodega habitual. Hoy en día todo se parece. Pero quizá estaba viendo sólo el lado imperial de la empresa en lugar de la faceta africana y el Imperialismo siempre había constituido una de sus dificultades.

—¡Un instante! —gritó míster Wilcox al recibir anuncio de su presencia. Tocó un timbre a cuyo conjuro apareció Charles.

Charles había escrito a su padre una carta muy correcta. Más correcta que la de Evie, en la que palpitaba una indignación infantil. Saludó con cortesía a su futura madrastra.

—Espero que mi mujer... ¿Cómo está usted?... espero que mi mujer nos dará una comida decente —empezó diciendo—. Le di

instrucciones, pero vivimos un poco al estilo salvaje. Mi mujer nos espera a tomar el té una vez haya visto Howards End. No sé qué pensará de aquel lugar. Yo no lo tocaría ni con pinzas. ¡Pero siéntese! Es un lugar cochambroso.

—Me gustará verlo —dijo Margaret sintiéndose tímida por primera vez.

—Lo verá usted en el peor momento, porque Bryce se largó el lunes pasado sin hacer siquiera que una mujer de faenas lo adecentase un poco. Nunca vi un revoltillo más espantoso. Es increíble. Hace un mes que nadie pone los pies en la casa.

—Me gustaría tener unas palabras con Bryce —dijo Henry desde el interior de su despacho.

—¿Por qué se fue tan repentinamente?

—Es un enfermo; no podía dormir.

—¡Pobre hombre!

—¿Qué pobre ni qué narices? —dijo míster Wilcox reuniéndose con ellos—. Tuvo el impudor de poner un tablón de anuncio sin pedirme permiso. Charles lo derribó.

—Sí, lo derribé —dijo Charles con modestia.

—Le he enviado un telegrama bien duro. Él y sólo él es responsable del mantenimiento de la casa durante los próximos tres años.

—Las llaves están en la granja; no quisimos cogerlas.

—Exacto.

—Dolly las quería coger, pero afortunadamente allí estaba yo.

—¿Cómo es míster Bryce? —preguntó Margaret.

A nadie le importaba. Míster Bryce era el arrendatario que no tenía derecho a subarrendar. Definirlo más habría supuesto una pérdida de tiempo. Hablaron largo rato de sus perrerías hasta que una chica trajo la carta insultante que había estado mecanografiando. Míster Wilcox añadió la firma.

—Ya nos podemos ir —dijo.

Les esperaba un viaje en coche, una forma de felicidad que Margaret no compartía. Charles les hizo entrar, cortés hasta el final,

y en un momento las oficinas de la Imperial and West African Rubber Company se perdieron en la distancia. Pero no fue un viaje impresionante. Quizá tuvo la culpa el tiempo, gris y preñado de nubes pesadas. Quizá Hertfordshire no está pensado para los viajeros motorizados. ¿Sabían ustedes que un conductor, en cierta ocasión, cruzó Westmoreland a tal velocidad que pasó sin verlo? Y si Westmoreland puede cruzarse en estas condiciones, mal irá una región cuya estructura delicada requiere un ojo atento. Hertfordshire es lo más tranquilo de Inglaterra; poco énfasis de ríos y colinas; es una Inglaterra meditativa. Si Drayton volviera a escribir una nueva versión de su incomparable poema, cantaría a las ninfas de Hertfordshire como seres de rasgos indeterminados, con el cabello oscurecido por el humo de Londres. Sus ojos serían tristes, desviados de su destino hacia las llanuras del Norte, su jefe no sería Isis o Sabrina, sino la opaca Lea. No llevarían ricos ropajes ni las animaría la danza; pero serían verdaderas ninfas.

El coche no viajaba tan rápido como habían supuesto, pues el tráfico de los días de Pascua atestaba la carretera del Norte. Pero fue lo bastante rápido para Margaret, persona de poco temple, que tenía la cabeza llena de gallinas y niños.

—No les pasa nada —dijo míster Wilcox—. Ya aprenderán, como las golondrinas y los cables telefónicos.

—Sí, pero mientras aprenden...

—Los coches son una realidad incontrovertible —respondió él—. Hay que hacerse a la idea. Ahí hay una iglesia muy bonita... vaya, no la has visto. Mira hacia otro lado, si te preocupa la carretera... Mira el paisaje.

Margaret miró el paisaje que subía y bajaba y se agitaba como un flan. En un momento dado se solidificó: habían llegado.

La casa de Charles quedaba a la izquierda; a la derecha, las formas abultadas de los Seis Túmulos. A Margaret le sorprendió que aparecieran en semejante vecindad. Su presencia interrumpía la hilera de residencias que se agolpaban hacia Hilton. Más allá de los túmulos vio los prados y un bosque bajo el cual decidió que yacían enterrados los mejores soldados. Odiaba la guerra, pero le gustaban los soldados: era una de sus deliciosas incongruencias.

Ahí estaba Dolly, vestida de punta en blanco, de pie en la puerta para recibirles, y allí estaban las primeras gotas de lluvia. Entraron alegremente a la carrera en la casa y tras una larga espera en el salón se sentaron a comer «al estilo salvaje» en la que cada plato ocultaba o exudaba crema. Míster Bryce fue el tema principal de la conversación. Dolly relató la visita de éste y el incidente de la llave y su suegro divirtió a los presentes tomándole el pelo y contradiciendo cuanto decía. Al parecer, era costumbre reírse de Dolly. También tomó el pelo a Margaret y ésta, arrancada de su meditación, le tomó el pelo a él. Dolly parecía sorprendida y la miraba con curiosidad. Después de comer bajaron los niños al comedor. A Margaret no le gustaban los niños, pero logró algún éxito con el de dos años e hizo reír mucho a Dolly hablándole con seriedad.

—Dales un beso y vámonos —dijo míster Wilcox.

Margaret se dispuso a salir, pero se negó a besar a los niños alegando que tenía muy mala suerte con los pequeños y aunque Dolly profirió cuchi-cuchis y mequi-mequis, se mantuvo en sus trece.

Por entonces llovía a cántaros. Llegó el coche con la capota puesta y volvió a perder el sentido del espacio. A los pocos minutos se pararon y Crane abrió la puerta del vehículo.

—¿Qué sucede? —preguntó Margaret.

—¿Tú qué crees? —dijo Henry.

Había un porche ante sus narices.

—¿Ya hemos llegado?

—Sí.

—¡Nunca lo hubiera creído! Hace años me parecía lejísimos.

Sonriente, pero un poco desilusionada, saltó del coche y su impulso la llevó hasta la puerta de entrada. Iba a abrirla cuando Henry dijo:

—No vale la pena que lo intentes, está cerrada. ¿Quién tiene la llave?

Como él mismo se había olvidado de recoger la llave de la granja, nadie contestó. Míster Wilcox quiso saber quién había

dejado abierta la cancela, a resultas de lo cual una vaca había entrado en el jardín y estaba echando a perder el césped del campo de crocket. Luego dijo un tanto molesto:

—Margaret, espérame a cubierto. Iré a buscar la llave. Está a menos de cien yardas de aquí.

—¿Puedo ir contigo?

—No; estaré de vuelta en un abrir y cerrar de ojos.

El coche dio media vuelta, se alejó y fue como si se hubiese alzado una cortina.

Por segunda vez en aquel día Margaret asistió a la aparición de la tierra.

Allí estaban los ciruelos que Helen había descrito tiempo atrás, la pista de tenis, el seto que se auguraba deslumbrante con las rosas de junio, pero cuya visión en aquellos momentos era de un verde negruzco y pálido. Junto a la cañada, otros colores más vivos se despertaban y en sus márgenes los lirios montaban guardia o avanzaban en batallones sobre el césped. Los tulipanes semejaban una bandeja de joyas. No pudo ver el olmo, pero una rama de la célebre parra, salpicada de nudos aterciopelados, había cubierto el porche. Margaret se quedó asombrada de la fertilidad de la tierra. Nunca había estado en un jardín donde las flores fueran tan hermosas; incluso las hierbas silvestres que distraídamente arrancaba del porche eran de un verde intenso. ¿Por qué habría huido el pobre míster Bryce de aquella belleza? Porque Margaret ya había decidido que aquel paraje era bello.

—¡Vaca traviesa! ¡Fuera de aquí! —gritó Margaret a la vaca sin la menor indignación.

La lluvia arreció vertida por un cielo sin viento, salpicando el letrero de anuncio que reposaba en el césped, donde Charles lo había arrojado. Le habría gustado hablar con Charles en otro mundo, en el mundo donde se tienen las conversaciones. ¡Caramba! ¡A Helen le gustaría esta idea! Charles muerto, todo el mundo muerto, nada vivo salvo las casas y los jardines. Lo evidente, muerto; lo intangible, vivo, sin conexión alguna entre ambos. Margaret sonrió. ¡Ojalá sus caprichos fueran tan claros! Sonriendo y

suspirando apoyó la mano en la puerta. La puerta se abrió. La casa no estaba cerrada.

Dudó. ¿No sería más correcto esperar a Henry? Margaret tenía un sentido muy acusado de la propiedad y prefería que él le enseñase la casa. Por otra parte, él le había dicho que se mantuviese a cubierto de la lluvia y el porche tenía filtraciones. Entró y la corriente de aire cerró la puerta a sus espaldas.

La recibió la desolación más absoluta. En las ventanas del vestíbulo había huellas de dedos sucios; tuberías y escombros se apilaban contra la madera. La civilización del bagaje había estado allí durante un mes y luego había levantado el campo. El comedor y el salón, a derecha e izquierda, se intuían por el papel de las paredes. Sólo eran habitaciones en las que guarecerse de la lluvia. Una gran viga cruzaba el techo. El comedor y el vestíbulo dejaba ver las suyas abiertamente, pero el salón estaba cubierto por un cielo raso. ¿Tal vez porque los hechos de la vida debían ocultarse a las mujeres? Salón, comedor, vestíbulo, ¡qué delicados nombres! Simples habitaciones donde los niños podían jugar y los amigos guarecerse de la lluvia. Sí, eran hermosas.

Abrió una de las puertas de enfrente —había dos— y las paredes empapeladas se convirtieron en paredes encaladas. Era el ala del servicio, aunque Margaret apenas se dio cuenta: sólo más habitaciones donde los amigos podían encontrar cobijo. El jardín en la parte trasera estaba lleno de cerezos y ciruelos. Más allá se insinuaba el prado y un núcleo negro de pinos. Sí, el prado era hermoso.

Enclaustrada por el tiempo inclemente, Margaret recuperó el sentido del espacio que el coche había intentado robarle. Recordó que diez millas cuadradas no son diez veces más hermosas que una milla cuadrada y que mil millas cuadradas no son el paraíso. El fantasma de la grandeza, que Londres fomenta, se desvaneció para siempre cuando Margaret cruzó el vestíbulo de Howards End y entró en la cocina y oyó la lluvia que corría a uno y otro lado del tejado, dividida por el canalón.

Recordó a Helen escudriñando medio Wessex desde el borde de los Downs de Purbeck y diciendo: «Algo tendrás que perder.»

Margaret no estaba segura. Por ejemplo, podía duplicar su reino abriendo la puerta que ocultaba la escalera.

Pensó en el mapa de África, en los Imperios, en su padre, en las dos naciones dominantes cuya sangre caliente corría en partes iguales por sus venas, pero cuya mezcla había enfriado su cerebro. Volvió al vestíbulo y al hacerlo, oyó resonar la casa.

—¿Eres tú, Henry? —preguntó.

No hubo respuesta. La casa resonó de nuevo.

—Henry, ¿eres tú?

Era el corazón de la casa que palpitaba débilmente al principio, luego más fuerte, marcialmente. El sonido dominaba la lluvia.

La imaginación hambrienta tiene miedo; la bien alimentada, no. Margaret abrió de golpe la puerta que daba a las escaleras. Un ruido como de tambores la ensordeció. Una mujer, una anciana, bajaba, con el cuerpo erguido, el rostro impasible, los labios abiertos que decían secamente:

—¡Ah! Vaya, la tomé por Ruth Wilcox.

—¿Yo? ¿Mistress Wilcox...? —balbuceó Margaret.

—Una ilusión, naturalmente... una ilusión. Tiene usted su misma manera de andar. Buenos días.

Y la mujer salió y se perdió en la lluvia.

CAPÍTULO XXIV

—¡Menudo susto le dio! —dijo míster Wilcox al relatar el incidente a Dolly a la hora del té—. Las mujeres no tenéis entereza. Claro, llegué yo y con una palabra lo arreglé todo, pero esa tonta de miss Avery... Te dio un buen susto, ¿verdad, Margaret? Cuando te encontré estabas inmóvil y apretando un puñado de hierba. ¡Esa mujer! Podría haber dicho algo, en lugar de bajar las escaleras con aquella caperuza inverosímil en la cabeza. Me la crucé por el camino cuando regresaba. Era capaz de asustar al mismísimo automóvil. Supongo que a miss Avery le encanta ser un personaje, como a la mayoría de las viejas solteronas —encendió un cigarrillo —. Es su último recurso. Dios sabe lo que estaría haciendo en la casa, aunque esto es asunto de Bryce, no mío.

—No fui tan pusilánime como tú sugieres —dijo Margaret—. Me asusté porque la casa había estado silenciosa todo el rato.

—¿La tomaste por un fantasma? —preguntó Dolly para quien «los fantasmas» e «ir a la iglesia» eran el compendio de todo lo invisible.

—No exactamente.

—La verdad es que te asustó —dijo Henry, que estaba lejos de disuadir a las mujeres de su cobardía—. ¡Pobre Margaret! Y con toda la razón. La clase baja es de lo más idiota.

—¿Miss Avery pertenece a la clase baja? —preguntó Margaret, y se descubrió a sí misma estudiando el estilo de decoración del salón de Dolly.

—Forma parte de la granja. Esta gente es incapaz de hacerse una composición de lugar. Dio por sentado que tú sabías quién era.

Dejó las llaves de Howards End en la entrada y supuso que las habías visto al entrar y las habías cogido, que cerrarías la casa y una vez hecho esto las devolverías. Mientras tanto su sobrina iba arriba y abajo buscándolas por la granja. La falta de educación hace a la gente descuidada. Hilton estaba lleno de mujeres como miss Avery tiempo atrás.

—Quizá no me habría disgustado.

—Sí, o como el regalo de boda que me hizo miss Avery —dijo Dolly, lo cual era ilógico, pero interesante. Por medio de Dolly, Margaret iba a aprender muchas cosas.

—Pero Charles dijo que no tenía que tomármelo a mal, porque miss Avery había conocido a su abuela.

—Como siempre, has contado la historia mal, mi querida Dorothea.

—Bueno, quiero decir a su bisabuela, la que dejó la casa a mistress Wilcox. ¿No es cierto que eran amigas ellas dos y miss Avery cuando Howards End todavía era una granja?

Su suegro echó un chorro de humo. Su actitud con respecto a su difunta esposa era curiosa. Solía aludir a ella u oír que hablaban de ella, pero jamás la mencionaba por su nombre. No estaba interesado en el oscuro y bucólico pasado. Dolly, en cambio, sí que lo estaba por las razones siguientes:

—¿No tenía mistress Wilcox un hermano... o quizá un tío? Bueno, fuera lo que fuese, le hizo proposiciones matrimoniales a miss Avery y ésta le dijo que no. Imagínate, si llega a decir «sí», habría sido la tía de Charles. Huy, qué bueno. «La tía de Charles.» Esta noche le haré rabiar con esto. El hombre en cuestión se fue y lo mataron. Esta vez estoy segura de haberlo contado bien. Tom Howard, ese fue el último de los Howard.

—Eso creo —dijo míster Wilcox con indiferencia.

—Es curioso. Howards End: el Fin de los Howard [12] —exclamó Dolly—. Esta tarde estoy ocurrente, ¿eh?

—¿Por qué no preguntas a Crane si también él ha llegado a su fin?

—Míster Wilcox, ¿qué quiere decir?

—Que si se ha terminado el té, tendríamos que irnos. Dolly es una mujer excelente —continuó—, pero tiene la cabeza a pájaros. Yo no podría vivir a su lado aunque me pagasen.

Margaret sonrió. Los Wilcox, que presentaban un frente unido a los de afuera, no podían vivir los unos al lado de los otros, ni siquiera al lado de las posesiones de los otros. Tenían el espíritu colonial que les impulsaba a buscar un lugar donde el hombre blanco pudiera depositar sus bártulos sin ser observado. Naturalmente, vivir en Howards End era imposible en tanto la joven pareja siguiera establecida en Hilton. Las objeciones que míster Wilcox ponía a la casa estaban ahora claras como el agua.

Crane había terminado su té y fue enviado al garaje, donde el coche había estado salpicando de agua enfangada al de Charles. El aguacero había calado seguramente los Seis Túmulos, llevando noticias de nuestra inquieta civilización —Curiosos promontorios —dijo Henry—, pero ahora entra; en otra ocasión... —tenía que estar en Londres a las siete o, a ser posible, a las seis y media. Una vez más Margaret perdió la noción del espacio; una vez más los árboles, las casas, la gente, los animales y las colinas emergieron y se sumieron en la suciedad. Ya estaba en Wickham Place.

Pasó una noche agradable. El sentimiento de flujo que la había obsesionado durante todo el año desapareció durante un rato. Olvidó el bagaje, el automóvil, los hombres apresurados que saben mucho y conectan poco. Recobró el sentido del espacio, base de la belleza terrena y, partiendo de Howards End, intentó entender Inglaterra. No lo logró: las visiones no vienen cuando se las busca, aunque pueden venir por medio de la búsqueda. No obstante, un inmenso amor por la isla se despertó en ella, un amor relacionado por un lado con los placeres de la carne; por otro, con lo inefable. Helen y su padre habían conocido esa clase de amor, el pobre Leonard Bast luchaba por conocerlo, pero para Margaret había estado oculto hasta aquella tarde. Le había sobrevenido a través de la casa y de miss Avery. A través de ambas. La noción de «a través de» persistía; su espíritu trémulo se encaminaba a una conclusión que sólo un necio habría expresado en palabras. Luego, virando hacia la calidez, se fundió con los ladrillos rojos, los ciruelos en flor y todas las alegrías tangibles de la primavera.

Henry, una vez calmada su agitación, la había llevado a dar una vuelta por su propiedad y le había explicado el destino y las dimensiones de las distintas habitaciones. Había esbozado la historia de aquel pequeño patrimonio.

—Es muy triste —empezó el monólogo— que no se invirtiese dinero aquí hace cincuenta años. Entonces el terreno era cuatro o cinco veces mayor de lo que es ahora: treinta acres, por lo menos. Se podría haber hecho algo: un pequeño parque o, al menos, un pequeño arbolado, y reedificar la casa más lejos de la carretera. ¿De qué sirve ahora? No queda más que el prado, y hasta eso estaba hipotecado cuando me hice cargo de él; sí, y la casa también. No, no fue divertido —Margaret vio a las dos mujeres mientras él hablaba, una vieja, la otra joven, viendo esfumarse su heredad. Las vio saludar a Henry como a un libertador—. La mala administración tuvo la culpa de todo; además, los días de las granjas pequeñas ya han pasado. No rinden, excepto en cultivos intensivos. La pequeña propiedad, la vuelta a la tierra... ¡habladurías filantrópicas! Ten por norma que nada rinde a pequeña escala. La mayoría del terreno que ves —estaban en una ventana superior, la única que miraba al Oeste— pertenece a los dueños del Parque: hicieron fortuna con el cobre; buena gente. La granja de miss Avery, la de Sishe, esa que llaman el Common, allí donde se ve aquella encina partida, todas cayeron, una tras otra, y ésta también —pero Henry la había salvado; sin hermosos ni profundos sentimientos, pero la había salvado y Margaret le quiso por aquella hazaña—. Cuando tuve un poco más de control hice lo que pude: vendí los dos animales y medio que había y el caballo sarnoso, me deshice de los aperos jubilados; derribé las dependencias exteriores; desequé los campos; arranqué no sé cuántos arbustos y árboles viejos, y, dentro de la casa convertí la cocina en vestíbulo, construí una cocina detrás, donde antes estaba la vaquería. Luego vino el garaje y todo lo demás. Pero aún se ve que ha sido una granja. Sin embargo, este lugar no gustará a ninguna de tus amistades artísticas.

En efecto, no gustaría; si él no había podido entender aquel lugar, las «amistades artísticas» menos aún lo entenderían: era Inglaterra, y el olmo que vio desde la ventana era un olmo inglés. Nada la había preparado para enfrentarse a su peculiar hermosura. No era un guerrero ni un amante ni un dios; Inglaterra no destaca

en ninguno de estos cometidos. Era un camarada, inclinado sobre la casa; fuerza y aventura en sus raíces, pero en sus dedos, ternura; y la circunferencia que doce hombres no habrían podido rodear se volvía evanescente al final, hasta que un puñado de capullos pálidos parecían flotar en el aire. Era un camarada. La casa y el árbol trascendían cualquier símil sexual. Margaret, a solas en su casa, pensaba en ellos como iba a hacerlo muchas noches ventosas y muchos días londinenses, pero compararlos a un hombre y una mujer minimizaba la visión. Con todo, ambos se mantenían dentro de los límites de lo humano. Su mensaje no era un mensaje de eternidad, sino de esperanza a este lado de la tumba. Mientras contemplaba al uno desde el otro, había brillado una relación más auténtica.

Una cosa más y el relato del día termina. Entraron un momento en el jardín y, con gran sorpresa de míster Wilcox, Margaret demostró haber estado en lo cierto. Dientes, dientes de cerdo aparecían en la corteza del olmo; sólo sobresalía la blanca punta de los dientes.

—¡Extraordinario! —exclamó él—. ¿Quién te lo dijo?

—Oí hablar de ellos un invierno, en Londres —fue la respuesta, porque también Margaret evitaba mencionar el nombre de mistress Wilcox.

CAPÍTULO XXV

Evie se enteró del compromiso matrimonial de su padre cuando iba a participar en un campeonato de tenis e hizo un partido desastroso. Casarse y abandonarle le había parecido natural, pero que él, una vez solo, hiciera lo mismo le parecía indigno. Además, Charles y Dolly decían que era por su culpa.

—Yo nunca pude imaginarme una cosa así —refunfuñó Evie—. Papá me llevó a visitarla una y otra vez y me hizo invitarla a Simpson. Bien, he terminado del todo con papá.

Más aún, era un insulto a la memoria de su madre, en eso estaban todos de acuerdo, y a Evie se le ocurrió la idea de devolver los encajes y las joyas de mistress Wilcox. No estaba muy segura del objeto de su protesta, pero a sus dieciocho años la idea de la renuncia le parecía importante, tanto más cuanto que le traían sin cuidado los encajes y las joyas. Dolly sugirió que Percy Cahill y ella fingieran romper su compromiso y quizá entonces míster Wilcox se pelearía con miss Schlegel y rompería el suyo; o que hicieran venir a Paul. Al llegar a este punto Charles le dijo que no siguiera diciendo tonterías. Evie decidió casarse lo antes posible; no era conveniente zascandilear con las Schlegel echándole el ojo. La fecha de la boda, en consecuencia, se adelantó de septiembre a agosto y con la borrachera de los regalos, Evie recobró gran parte de su buen humor.

Margaret se enteró de que le reservaban un papel en la función, y un papel importante. Sería una magnífica oportunidad —dijo Henry— para conocer a su círculo de amistades. Acudiría sir James Bidder y todos los Cahill, los Fussell y su cuñada, mistress Warrington Wilcox, que afortunadamente acababa de regresar de su

periplo alrededor del mundo. Margaret amaba a Henry, pero su círculo de amistades era otro cantar. Míster Wilcox no tenía la virtud de rodearse de gente agradable; a decir verdad, para un hombre de su habilidad y sus cualidades, sus elecciones habían sido particularmente desafortunadas. No tenía ningún criterio selectivo, aparte de una cierta preferencia por la mediocridad. Se contentaba con organizar una de las cosas más importantes de la vida de un modo accidental, y así, mientras sus inversiones eran acertadas, sus amistades eran desacertadas. Solía decir a Margaret: «Fulano de Tal es un gran muchacho, un tipo excelente» y, al conocerle, resultaba ser un bruto o un pelmazo. Si Henry hubiera mostrado verdadero afecto por el tipo en cuestión, ella lo habría comprendido, porque el afecto lo justifica todo. Pero Henry parecía carecer de sentimientos al respecto. El «tipo excelente» podía convertirse en cualquier momento en «un tipo al que nunca consideré valioso, y menos ahora», un objeto que arrojaba alegremente al olvido. Margaret había hecho lo mismo cuando era una colegiala. En la actualidad nunca olvidaba a nadie por quien una vez se hubiese interesado. «Conectaba», aunque la conexión pudiera ser amarga, y esperaba que Henry, andando el tiempo, haría lo mismo.

Evie no iba a casarse en Ducie Street. Tenía el capricho de algo «rural» y, por otra parte, no habría nadie en Londres por aquellas fechas, de modo que asentó sus reales en Oniton Grange por unas semanas, las proclamas matrimoniales se publicaron debidamente en la iglesia parroquial y, durante un par de días la pequeña villa, aletargada entre colinas rojizas, se desveló por el ruido de nuestra civilización y se apartó de la carretera para dejar paso a los automóviles. Oniton era un descubrimiento de míster Wilcox, un descubrimiento del que no se sentía muy orgulloso. Estaba próximo a la línea divisoria con el País de Gales y era tan difícil de accesos que míster Wilcox consideró que debía de ser algo muy especial. En su suelo se alzaba un castillo derruido. Pero, una vez allí ¿qué se podía hacer? La caza era mala; la pesca, indiferente y las mujeres de la familia definían el paisaje como «nada del otro mundo». Resultó ser que el lugar se hallaba en el sitio malo de Shropshire —¡maldito sea!— y aunque míster Wilcox jamás criticaba sus propiedades en voz alta, esperaba la oportunidad de quitárselo de encima y salir huyendo. La boda de Evie iba a ser la última aparición en público de aquel lugar. No bien encontraron un

inquilino, el lugar se convirtió en «una cosa que nunca encontró valiosa, y menos ahora» y al igual que Howards End, se desvaneció en el Limbo.

No obstante, Oniton estaba destinado a causar una impresión duradera en Margaret. Creía que iba a ser su futuro hogar y anhelaba entablar relación con el cura, etc., y, a ser posible, tomar contacto con la vida local. Era una típica villa de mercado, de las más pequeñas de Inglaterra, que había servido al valle solitario durante siglos y defendido nuestros límites contra los celtas. A pesar de las circunstancias, a pesar de la torpe hilaridad que acogió su entrada en el compartimento reservado en la estación de Paddington, los sentidos de Margaret estaban despiertos y alerta, y aunque Oniton acabaría por ser uno de sus innumerables «malos comienzos», nunca lo olvidó, ni olvidó las cosas que allí sucedieron.

El grupo londinense sólo constaba de ocho personas: los Fussell, padre e hijo, dos damas angloindias llamadas mistress Plynlimon y lady Edser, mistress Warrington Wilcox y su hija y, por último, esa jovencita delicada y tranquila que no falta en ninguna boda y que contemplaba con interés a Margaret, la elegida. Dolly estaba ausente, un acontecimiento doméstico la retenía en Hilton; Paul había enviado un telegrama humorístico; Charles esperaba al grupo con tres coches en Shrewsbury; Helen había declinado la invitación; Tibby ni siquiera había respondido. La organización era excelente, como cabía esperar de todo lo que emprendía Henry. Por doquier quedaba patente su inteligencia sensata y generosa en el fondo. Apenas llegaron al tren los invitados cayeron bajo su hospitalidad; una etiqueta especial para su equipaje, un guía, una comida especial. Los invitados no tenían otra cosa que hacer más que mostrarse contentos y, a ser posible, guapos. Margaret pensó con desmayo en sus propias nupcias, presumiblemente bajo la organización de Tibby. «Míster Theobald Schlegel y miss Helen Schlegel tienen el honor de invitar a mistress Plynlimon con ocasión de la boda de su hermana Margaret.» La fórmula resulta increíble, pero pronto habría que imprimirla y enviarla y, aunque Wickham Place no tenía por qué competir con Oniton, debía alimentar con propiedad a sus huéspedes y proveerlos de sillas suficientes. Su boda sería desastrosa o burguesa y Margaret albergaba la esperanza de que fuese esto último. Una función como la presente,

escenificada con una pulcritud rayana en la belleza, quedaba más allá de su capacidad y de la de sus amigos.

El suntuoso ronroneo de un Great Western Express no es mal fondo para una conversación y el viaje transcurrió de un modo placentero. Imposible sobrepasar la amabilidad de los dos caballeros. Levantaron las ventanillas para algunas damas, las bajaron para otras, llamaron al servicio, identificaron los colegios cuando el tren atravesó Oxford, agarraron libros o bolsos en el acto de caer al suelo. Y, sin embargo, no había nada remilgado en su cortesía: tenía un toque de Public School y, aunque asidua, no dejaba de ser viril. En nuestros campos de juego se han ganado más batallas que en Waterloo, y Margaret se sometió a ese encanto con el que no estaba del todo de acuerdo y no dijo nada cuando los colegios de Oxford fueron identificados erróneamente. «Y Dios los creó hombre y mujer.» El viaje a Shrewsbury confirmó esta dudosa afirmación y el largo salón de cristal, que se movía con tanta facilidad y era tan cómodo, se convirtió en el invernáculo de la idea del sexo.

En Shrewsbury el aire era fresco. Margaret ansiaba paisajes y mientras los demás acababan su té en el Cuervo, se agenció un coche y dio vueltas por la asombrosa ciudad. Su chófer no era el fiel Crane, sino un italiano empeñado en hacerle llegar con retraso. Charles, reloj en mano aunque sin torcer el gesto, hacía guardia en la puerta del hotel. Le dijo a Margaret que no se preocupase, que no era la última ni muchísimo menos. Luego se zambulló en el bar y se le oyó decir: «Por el amor de Dios, metan prisa a las mujeres; no saldremos nunca», y a Albert Fussell replicar: «Que lo haga otro, yo ya he cumplido mi parte», y al coronel Fussell opinar que las mujeres se estaban acicalando para impresionar. En aquel momento apareció Myra —la hija de mistress Warrington— a la que Charles, como primo suyo que era, reprendió un poco: había cambiado su elegante sombrero de viaje por un sombrero de automovilista. Luego llegó la propia mistress Warrington, precediendo a la chica delicada y tranquila. Las dos damas angloindias eran siempre las últimas; las doncellas, el guía y el equipaje pesado habían sido enviados ya por una línea secundaria a una estación próxima a Oniton, pero aún quedaban cinco sombrereras por embalar, y cuatro bolsas con trajes, y cinco guardapolvos que ponerse y quitarse en el

último momento, ya que Charles los declaró innecesarios. Los hombres lo presidían todo con un inagotable buen humor. A eso de las cinco y media la expedición estaba preparada y partió de Shrewsbury por el Puente de Gales.

Shropshire no era taciturno como Hertfordshire. Aunque el rápido movimiento les privaba de la mitad de su magia, aún transmitía el sentido de las colinas. Se aproximaban a los contrafuertes que empujan al Severn hacia el Este y lo convierten en un río inglés y el sol, que brillaba sobre los centinelas de Gales, les daba directamente en los ojos. Una vez recogido un nuevo invitado, volvieron al Sur evitando las montañas más altas, pero conscientes de alguna cima ocasional, redonda y mansa, cuyo colorido difería en calidad del de la tierra del llano y cuyos contornos se alteraban más lentamente. El misterio tranquilo iba en aumento bajo los horizontes oscilantes: el Poniente, como siempre, se retiraba con un secreto que tal vez no vale la pena desentrañar, pero que nunca descubrirá el hombre práctico.

Los viajeros hablaban de la Reforma Tributaria.

Mistress Warrington acababa de regresar de las colonias. Como muchos otros críticos del Imperio, su boca había sido amordazada con comida y sólo tenía palabras para ensalzar la hospitalidad de que había sido objeto y prevenía a la Madre Patria de los peligros que encerraba la tendencia a dar un trato ligero a los jóvenes titanes. «Amenazan con proclamarse independientes —exclamaba—, ¿y a dónde iríamos a parar, en tal caso? Miss Schlegel, tiene usted que disuadir a Henry para que se mantenga firme en lo de la Reforma Tributaria, ¿lo hará? Es nuestra última esperanza.» Margaret se confesó alegremente partidario del otro lado y ambas intercambiaron citas de sus respectivos manuales mientras el coche las transportaba a lo profundo de las colinas. Eran éstas más curiosas que impresionantes, ya que sus contornos carecían de belleza y los rosados prados de sus cimas semejaban pañuelos de un gigante puestos a secar. Algún esporádico afloramiento rocoso, algún bosque ocasional, una «tundra» fortuita, marrón y sin árboles, todo sugería que estaban a las puertas de una tierra salvaje, pero el color dominante era un verde agrícola. El aire se hizo más frío; acababan de superar el último desnivel y Oniton se extendía a sus pies, con su iglesia, sus casas radiantes, su castillo y

su península, formada por un meandro del río. Junto al castillo se alzaba una mansión gris, desprovista de carácter, pero agradable, cuyos aledaños se alargaban por el istmo de la península: ese tipo de casa que se construía en Inglaterra a principios del siglo pasado, cuando la arquitectura era aún una expresión del carácter nacional. Era la Granja, señalo Albert por encima del hombro. Pisó el freno, el coche redujo velocidad y se detuvo.

—Lo siento —dijo volviéndose—. Tenga la bondad de apearse... por la puerta de la derecha. Salgan.

—¿Qué ha ocurrido? —preguntó mistress Warrington.

El coche que venía tras ellos se detuvo y se oyó la voz de Charles que decía: «Saquen inmediatamente a las mujeres.» Hubo un concurso de varones y Margaret y sus compañeras fueron extraídas y colocadas en el segundo automóvil. ¿Qué había ocurrido? Cuando arrancaban de nuevo, la puerta de una alquería se abrió y una muchacha prorrumpió en un alarido salvaje dirigido a ellos.

—¿Qué sucede? —gritaron las damas.

Charles condujo unas cien yardas sin hablar y luego dijo:

—No pasa nada. Su coche acaba de atropellar a un perro.

—¡Para! —gritó Margaret horrorizada.

—No se ha hecho nada.

—¿Seguro que no se ha hecho nada? —preguntó Myra.

—No.

—¡Por favor, para! —dijo Margaret inclinándose hacia él. Iba de pie en el coche y sus acompañantes la sujetaban por las rodillas—. Quiero volver. Para, por favor.

Charles no le hizo el menor caso.

—Hemos dejado a míster Fussell —dijo otro—, a Angelo y a Crane.

—Sí, pero a ninguna mujer.

—Supongo que un poco de... —mistress Warrington se rascó la palma de la mano—, será más adecuado que cualquiera de nosotras.

—La compañía de seguros se hará cargo de todo —señaló Charles— y Albert llevará a cabo las negociaciones.

—A pesar de todo, insisto en que quiero volver —repitió Margaret irritada por momentos.

Charles no le hizo caso. El coche, sobrecargado con las refugiadas, continuaba su marcha muy lentamente colina abajo.

—Ya están los hombres —corearon las otras—. Los hombres lo arreglarán.

—Los hombres no pueden arreglarlo. ¡Oh! Esto es ridículo Charles, te digo que pares.

—No vale la pena parar —dijo Charles recalcando sus palabras.

—¿Ah, no? —dijo Margaret, y saltó del automóvil.

Cayó sobre sus rodillas, se rompió los guantes y se le quedó el sombrero colgando sobre la oreja. Unos gritos de alarma la siguieron.

—¿Se ha hecho usted daño? —exclamó Charles saltando a su lado.

—¡Por supuesto que me he hecho daño! —dijo Margaret.

—Le sangra la mano.

—Ya lo sé.

—Esto me va a costar una buena bronca de mi padre.

—Tenías que haberlo pensado antes, Charles.

Charles nunca se había encontrado antes en una situación semejante. Una mujer rebelde se alejaba cojeando y esta visión le resultaba demasiado extraña para provocarle ira. Se recobró cuando los demás se reunieron con ellos: a ésos sí los entendía. Les ordenó volver.

Vieron a Albert Fussell que se dirigía hacia ellos.

—¡Asunto arreglado! —dijo—. No era un perro, era un gato.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó Charles con aire de triunfo—, sólo era un asqueroso gato.

—¿Cabe uno más en el coche? Dejé correr el asunto en cuanto vi que no era un perro; los chóferes están arreglándose con la

chica.

Margaret siguió andando con decisión. ¿Por qué tenían que arreglarse los chóferes con la muchacha? Las mujeres que se refugiaban detrás de los hombres, los hombres que se refugiaban detrás de los criados... todo el sistema estaba mal; y ella iba a desafiarlo.

—¡Miss Schlegel, se ha herido usted en la mano!

—Voy a ver —dijo Margaret—. No me espere, míster Fussell.

El segundo coche dobló la curva.

—Ya está arreglado, señora —dijo Crane. Había adquirido la costumbre de llamarla «señora».

—¿Qué está arreglado?, ¿el gato?

—Sí, señora. La chica recibirá una compensación.

—Era una chica mucho ruda —dijo Angelo desde el tercer coche, pensativamente.

—¿No lo habría sido usted?

El italiano extendió las manos, dando a entender que no había pensado en ser rudo, pero que estaba dispuesto a serlo si a ella le complacía. La situación se había vuelto absurda. Los caballeros mosconeaban en torno a miss Schlegel con ofertas de asistencia y lady Edser empezó a vendarle la mano. Margaret se rindió, disculpándose ligeramente. La condujeron de nuevo a su coche y pronto el paisaje volvió a recobrar su movimiento, desapareció la solitaria alquería, el castillo se apoltronó en su cojín de césped. Habían llegado. Sin duda Margaret había hecho el ridículo, pero sintió que todo el viaje desde Londres había sido irreal. Los invitados no tenían relación con la tierra y sus emociones. Eran polvo, un olor malo y una charla cosmopolita. La muchacha cuyo gato acababan de matar había vivido más intensamente que ellos.

—Oh, Henry —exclamó—, he sido muy traviesa —había decidido adoptar aquella actitud—. Atropellamos a un gato. Charles me dijo que no saltase, pero yo quería ¡y mira! —le enseñó la mano vendada—. La pobre Meg se dio un buen trompazo.

Míster Wilcox se quedó perplejo. En traje de etiqueta esperaba a sus huéspedes en el vestíbulo para darles la bienvenida.

—Creyendo que era un perro —añadió mistress Warrington.

—Ah, un perro es el mejor amigo del hombre —dijo el coronel Fussell—. Cada vez que vea un perro me acordaré de usted.

—¿Te has hecho daño, Margaret?

—Nada importante; además, es la mano izquierda.

—Bien, date prisa y cámbiate.

Obedeció y lo mismo hicieron los demás. Míster Wilcox se volvió a su hijo.

—Dime, Charles, ¿qué ha ocurrido?

Charles fue absolutamente honesto. Describió lo que creía que había sucedido. Albert había aplastado un gato, miss Schlegel había perdido el control de sus nervios, como podría haberle ocurrido a cualquier mujer. La habían conducido al otro coche, pero cuando éste estaba en marcha, saltó a pesar de lo que le habían dicho. Después de caminar un trecho por la carretera, se calmó y dijo que lo sentía. Míster Wilcox aceptó la explicación de su hijo, ignorando que Margaret la había preparado hábilmente. Encajaba demasiado bien con su concepto de la naturaleza femenina. En el salón, después de cenar, el coronel apuntó la opinión de que miss Schlegel había saltado por malicia. Recordaba él que una vez, hacía ya muchos años, en el puerto de Gibraltar, una joven, una joven de gran belleza, había saltado por la borda de un barco por una apuesta. Aún le parecía estarla viendo, y a todos los chicos arrojándose al mar detrás de ella. Pero tanto Charles como míster Wilcox convinieron en que probablemente se trataba de los nervios en el caso de miss Schlegel. Charles estaba deprimido. Aquella mujer tenía agallas. Todo terminaría mal, pero antes haría sufrir mucho a su padre. Salió a dar un paseo por la explanada del castillo para reflexionar sobre el asunto. La noche era deliciosa. El río murmuraba a su alrededor por tres lados lleno de mensajes de Poniente; sobre su cabeza, las ruinas recortaban figuras contra el cielo. Reposó cuidadosamente sus relaciones con aquella familia, hasta que encajó a Helen, a Margaret y a la tía Juley en una conspiración organizada. La paternidad le había vuelto receloso. Tenía dos niños a su cargo y uno más en camino, tres hijos que veían disminuir de día en día sus expectativas económicas. «Ya sé, ya sé que papá quiere ser justo con todos —se decía—, pero no se

puede ser justo indefinidamente. El dinero no es elástico. ¿Qué pasará cuando Evie tenga hijos? Y, ya que sale el tema, lo mismo puede ocurrirle a papá. No habrá bastante para todos, porque no hay otras entradas, ni por parte de Dolly ni por parte de Percy. ¡Maldita sea!» Miró con envidia la granja, cuyas ventanas chorreaban luz y risas. Entre unas cosas y otras, esta boda costaría un pico. Dos damas paseaban arriba y abajo por la terraza y el viento trajo a sus oídos las sílabas «Im-pe-ria-lis-mo». Adivinó que una de las damas era su tía. Ella podría haberle ayudado de no haber tenido también una familia a su cargo. «Cada uno para sí», se repitió —una máxima que le había estimulado en el pasado, pero que ahora sonaba sombría entre las ruinas de Oniton—. Charles carecía de la habilidad de su padre para los negocios y sentía por ello una mayor estima por el dinero; a menos que pudiera heredar mucho, temía dejar a sus hijos en la indigencia.

Mientras estaba sentado pensando, una de las damas abandonó la terraza y caminó hacia la explanada. Charles reconoció a Margaret por la blancura de la venda que destacaba en su brazo y ocultó su cigarro para que la brasa no le traicionase. Margaret escaló el promontorio en zigzag, agachándose de vez en cuando, como si estuviera arrancando el césped. Aunque parezca absolutamente increíble, Charles pensó por un momento que Margaret estaba enamorada de él y que venía a seducirle. Charles creía en las mujeres seductoras —complemento imprescindible del hombre fuerte— y, careciendo como carecía de sentido del humor, no pudo rechazar aquel pensamiento con una sonrisa. Margaret, prometida de su padre e invitada en la boda de su hermana, pasó de largo sin advertir su presencia y Charles tuvo que admitir que se había equivocado en aquel punto. Pero ¿qué estaba haciendo? ¿Por qué estaba dando traspiés entre los cascotes, enganchándose el vestido en las zarzas y los cardos? Cuando Margaret dio la vuelta a la torre debió de colocarse en tal posición que el viento le llevó el olor del cigarro, porque exclamó:

—¡Hola! ¿Quién hay ahí?

Charles no respondió.

—¿Sajón o celta? —continuó ella riendo en la oscuridad—. No importa. Quienquiera que sea tendrá que escucharme. Me gusta este lugar. Me gusta Shropshire. Odio Londres. Estoy encantada de

que éste sea mi futuro hogar. Ah, Dios mío —dijo mientras retrocedía hacia la casa—, ¡qué alivio haber llegado!

«Esta mujer lleva malas intenciones», pensó Charles apretando los labios. A los pocos minutos la siguió al interior, porque la humedad empapaba el suelo. La neblina se levantaba del río, que se hacía invisible por momentos sin dejar de murmurar cada vez con más fuerza. Había llovido en las colinas de Gales.

CAPÍTULO XXVI

A la mañana siguiente una leve neblina cubría la península. El tiempo prometía ser bueno y la silueta del promontorio del castillo se perfilaba con mayor claridad cada vez que Margaret la miraba. Veía la torre almenada y el sol que teñía de oro los cascotes y cargaba de azul el firmamento blanco. Las sombras de la casa se unieron unas a otras y cayeron sobre el jardín. Un gato se puso a mirar a su ventana y maulló. Por último apareció el río que conservaba aún la neblina entre sus bancos y sus alisos colgantes, sólo visible hasta la primera colina que cortaba sus altas riberas. Margaret se sentía fascinada por Oniton. Había dicho que le gustaba el lugar, pero era más bien su tensión romántica lo que le cautivaba. Los montes druídicos fugazmente entrevistos durante el viaje, los ríos que corrían desde aquellas tierras hacia Inglaterra, las masas de las colinas bajas modeladas con descuido le hacían estremecerse de poesía. La casa era insignificante, pero la vista de que gozaba sería una fuente perpetua de alegría. Margaret pensó en los amigos que invitaría y en un nuevo Henry convertido a la vida rural. Las gentes del pueblo, asimismo, se auguraban favorables. El rector de la parroquia había cenado con ellos la noche anterior y Margaret descubrió que había sido en tiempos amigo de su padre, de modo que ya la conocía de antemano. Le gustó. Él le introduciría en el ambiente de la villa. Por otra parte, sir James Bidder alardeó de que, a una palabra de Margaret, haría que acudiesen las familias más notables del condado a veinte millas a la redonda. Margaret dudaba de que sir James fuese capaz de realizar lo que había prometido, pero con tal de que Henry las creyera las mejores familias del condado cuando acudiesen, ya se daba por satisfecha.

Charles y Albert Fussell cruzaron el prado. Iban a darse un baño matutino. Un sirviente les seguía con los equipos. Margaret tenía la intención de ir a dar un paseo antes del desayuno, pero comprendió que aquellas horas estaban consagradas a los hombres y se conformó con entretenerse contemplando los contratiempos de los bañistas. En primer lugar no encontraron la llave de la caseta. Charles se quedó al lado del río con los brazos cruzados mientras el criado gritaba y era malinterpretado por los demás criados. Luego surgieron dificultades con el trampolín y al cabo de poco tres personas corrían por el prado arriba y abajo, con órdenes y contraórdenes, recriminaciones y disculpas. Si Margaret quería saltar de un automóvil, saltaba; si Tibby creía que chapotear era bueno para sus tobillos, lo hacía; si un oficinista deseaba un poco de aventura, se iba a pasear por la oscuridad. Pero aquellos atletas parecían paralizados. No podían bañarse sin sus pertrechos, aunque el sol había aparecido y las últimas volutas de neblina se levantaban del rizado arroyo. ¿Disfrutaban de la vida corporal, después de todo? ¿No sería que los hombres que ellos consideraban despectivamente unos inútiles podían derrotarles incluso en su propio terreno?

Margaret pensó cómo serían los preparativos para el baño en su día: sin molestar a los criados, sin otros pertrechos que los que dictara el sentido común. Sus reflexiones se vieron interrumpidas por la jovencita delicada y tranquila que había salido para juguetear con el gato y se quedó contemplando a Margaret que contemplaba a los hombres. Margaret le dijo: «Buenos días», de un modo un poco cortante. Su voz emanaba consternación. Charles miró en derredor, completamente teñido de azul índigo, se desvaneció en el cobertizo y no se le volvió a ver.

—Miss Wilcox ya está... —susurró la muchachita y su voz se hizo ininteligible.

—¿Que está qué?

La respuesta sonó como: «...canesú... bata...» —No te oigo.

—...en la cama... papel de tisú...

Deduciendo que el traje nupcial estaba a la vista y que procedía una visita, Margaret fue a la habitación de Evie. Allí todo eran risas. Evie, en enaguas, bailaba con una de las damas angloindias

mientras la otra adoraba unas yardas de satén blanco. Chillaban, reían, cantaban y el perro ladraba.

Margaret a su vez gritó un poco, sin convicción. No creía que una boda fuera algo tan divertido. A lo mejor le faltaba algo.

Evie farfulló:

—¡Dolly es una burra por no haber venido! ¡Menudo alboroto armaríamos!

Margaret bajó a desayunar.

Henry ya estaba instalado; habló poco, comió despacio y fue, a los ojos de Margaret, el único miembro del grupo que consiguió disimular con éxito sus emociones. No podía suponerle indiferente ni ante la pérdida de una hija ni ante la presencia de su futura esposa. Sin embargo, permanecía intacto, emitiendo órdenes de vez en cuando, órdenes que proporcionaban comodidad a los demás. Henry se interesó por su mano y le dijo que sirviera el café mientras mistress Warrington servía el té. Cuando bajó Evie hubo un momento de desconcierto y las dos damas se levantaron para ceder sus puestos a la novia.

—¡Burton! —dijo Henry—, sirva el té y el café desde el aparador.

No era auténtico tacto, pero era tacto, al fin y al cabo, tan útil como el auténtico y más útil aún que éste para salvar situaciones en un Consejo de Administración. Henry llevaba una boda como un funeral, paso a paso, detalle a detalle, sin levantar nunca los ojos al conjunto. Daban ganas de exclamar al concluir:

«Muerte, ¿dónde está tu aguijón? Amor, ¿dónde está tu victoria?» Después del desayuno Margaret quiso tener un cambio de impresiones con él. Siempre era mejor abordarlo formalmente, así que le pidió una entrevista, porque al día siguiente él se iba a cazar perdices y ella debía regresar a la ciudad, con Helen.

—Por supuesto, querida —dijo él—. Ya lo creo que tengo tiempo. ¿Qué quieres?

—Nada.

—Temí que algo fuera mal.

—No, no tengo nada que decirte. Pero habla tú.

Mirando de reojo su reloj, Henry habló de la maldita curva junto al atrio de la iglesia. Margaret le escuchó con interés. Podía responder a Henry sin aparente desprecio, aunque todo su interior estuviera aullando por ayudarle. Había abandonado todo plan de acción. El amor es el mejor plan y cuanto más le amase, más posibilidades había de que consiguiera poner en orden su alma. Un momento como aquel, sentados bajo el día espléndido en el camino del futuro hogar, era tan dulce para ella que con seguridad su dulzura le alcanzaría a él también. Cada movimiento de sus ojos, cada apertura de sus labios hirsutos, de su mandíbula rasurada, podían ser el preludio de la ternura que acaba de un solo golpe con el mono y la bestia. Decepcionada cien veces, Margaret aún abrigaba esperanzas. Le quería con una lucidez demasiado clara para temer las nubes. Tanto si profería trivialidades, como hoy, como si le soltaba besos al atardecer, Margaret podía perdonarle, podía responder.

—Si hay una curva tan mala —sugirió—, ¿no podríamos llegar a 1? iglesia a pie? No Evie, ni tú, por supuesto, pero el resto de los invitados podría ir primero. Eso supondría menos coches.

—No podemos permitir que las damas vayan a pie por la Plaza del Mercado. A los Fussell no les gustaría; en la boda de Charles se mostraron muy peculiares. Mi... una de nuestro grupo quería caminar. A decir verdad, la iglesia estaba a la vuelta de la esquina y a mí no me habría importado, pero el coronel se mantuvo muy firme en este sentido.

—Los hombres no deberíais ser tan caballerosos —dijo Margaret pensativamente.

—¿Por qué no?

Ella sabía por qué, pero dijo que lo ignoraba. Entonces él anunció que, a menos que ella tuviera algo especial que decir, tenía que revisar las bodegas, y ambos se fueron en busca de Burton. Oniton era una verdadera casa de campo, a pesar de ser sosa y poco conveniente. Recorrieron pasadizos ruinosos buscando de habitación en habitación y asustando a sirvientas desconocidas entregadas a la realización de oscuras tareas. El banquete de bodas debía estar a punto para cuando volvieran de la iglesia, y el té se serviría en el jardín. La visión de gente tan seria y agitada hizo

sonreír a Margaret, pero consideró que se les pagaba para ser serios y que les gustaba estar agitados. Eran los pequeños engranajes de la máquina que izaba a Evie a la gloria nupcial. Un muchachito les cerró el paso cargado con cubos de desperdicios. Sin percatarse de la categoría de sus interlocutores, les dijo: «Con su permiso, dejen paso, por favor.» Henry le preguntó por Burton, pero todos los criados eran nuevos y no se conocían por los nombres los unos a los otros. En la despensa se hallaban sentados los músicos que ya estaban bebiendo cerveza a pesar de haber estipulado una ración de champán como parte integrante de su salario. De la cocina llegaban aromas de Arabia mezclados con gritos. Margaret comprendió lo que había sucedido, porque también sucedía en Wickham Place: uno de los platos se había quemado, y el cocinero arrojaba briznas de sándalo para ocultar el olor. Al final encontraron al mayordomo. Henry le entregó las llaves y condujo a Margaret a la despensa. Franquearon dos puertas. Margaret, que guardaba todo el vino que tenían al fondo del armario ropero, se quedó atónita ante el espectáculo. «¡Nunca nos beberemos todo esto!», gritó, y los dos hombres se sintieron súbitamente hermanados e intercambiaron sonrisas de complicidad. Margaret se sintió como si hubiese saltado otra vez de un coche en marcha.

Ciertamente, Oniton requería cierta adaptación. No sería pequeña labor seguir siendo la misma y asimilar aquel sistema. Tenía que seguir siendo la misma tanto por Henry como por ella, porque una mujer-sombra degrada al marido que la acompaña; y tenía que asimilar todo aquello por razones de honestidad civil, porque no tenía derecho a casarse con un hombre y hacerle sentirse incómodo. Su único aliado era el poder del hogar. La pérdida de Wickham Place le había enseñado más que su posesión. Howards End había repetido la lección. Ahora estaba decidida a crear un nuevo santuario entre las colinas.

Después de visitar la bodega, se vistió y la boda tuvo lugar. Le pareció un acontecimiento mínimo en comparación con los preparativos que había ocasionado. Todo funcionó con la precisión de un reloj. Míster Cahill se materializó en el espacio y esperaba a la novia a la puerta de la iglesia. Nadie dejó caer el anillo ni equivocó las respuestas ni pisó la cola del vestido de Evie ni lloró. En pocos minutos el sacerdote desempeñó sus deberes, firmaron en

el registro y volvieron a los coches, a luchar contra la peligrosa curva próxima al atrio de la iglesia. Margaret estaba convencida de que no se habían casado y de que la iglesia normanda estaba dedicada a otros asuntos.

En la casa esperaban nuevos documentos que firmar y un banquete que engullir. Acudieron a la fiesta unas cuantas personas más. Menudearon las excusas y, después de todo, no hubo mucha gente; menos de la que habría en la boda de Margaret. Se fijó en los platos y en las alfombras rojas, para poder dar a Henry todo lo exteriormente adecuado. Pero internamente esperaba darle algo mejor que aquella mezcla de misa dominical y cacería de zorros. ¡Si al menos alguien se hubiera sentido consternado! Pero aquella boda había transcurrido perfectamente bien, «casi como un baile de palacio», en opinión de lady Edser, con la que Margaret estuvo completamente de acuerdo.

Y así transcurrió lentamente aquel día. La novia y el novio desaparecieron, entre carcajadas, y, por segunda vez, el sol se retiró hacia las colinas de Gales. Henry, que estaba más cansado de lo que debía, condujo a Margaret al prado del castillo y en tono de desacostumbrada suavidad le dijo que estaba satisfecho. Todo había salido muy bien. Margaret sintió que aquella alabanza también la concernía y enrojeció. A decir verdad, había hecho lo posible para complacer a los intratables amigos de Henry, esforzándose en reverenciar a los hombres. Todos los invitados partían aquella misma noche. Sólo los Warrington y la jovencita delicada y tranquila se quedaban hasta el día siguiente. Los demás se retiraban ya hacia la casa, a terminar de hacer sus equipajes.

—Sí, creo que todo salió muy bien —corroboró ella—. Y ya que tuve que saltar del coche, me alegro de haber aterrizado en la mano izquierda. Estoy muy contenta de todo, Henry, querido; sólo deseo que los huéspedes que vengan a nuestra boda se sientan la mitad de bien de lo que se han sentido en ésta. Tendrás que recordar que los Schlegel no tenemos a ninguna persona práctica en la familia, exceptuando a mi tía, y ésta no está acostumbrada a los acontecimientos a gran escala.

—Ya lo sé —dijo él seriamente—. En tales circunstancias, será mejor ponerlo todo en manos de Harrod's o de Whiteley's, o incluso ir a un hotel.

—¿Tú quieres ir a un hotel?

—Sí, porque... bueno, no quiero meterme en tus asuntos. Sin duda querrás celebrar tu boda en tu vieja casa.

—Mi vieja casa se cae a pedazos, Henry. Sólo quiero mi nueva casa. ¿No es una noche maravillosa?...

—El Alexandrina no está mal.

—¿El Alexandrina? —repitió ella, más ocupada en las volutas de humo que salían de las chimeneas y gobernaban los rayos del sol poniente con sus paralelas grises.

—Está cerca de Curzon Street.

—¿Ah, sí? Pues casémonos cerca de Curzon Street.

Y se volvió hacia Levante, para contemplar el remolino de oro. Donde el río rodeaba la colina, el sol daba de lleno. El País de la Ilusión debía de hallarse bajo aquella curva, y su precioso líquido fluía hacia ellos, pasando junto a la caseta de baño de Charles. Lo contempló con tanta fijeza que se le enturbiaron los ojos y cuando los volvió hacia la casa no pudo reconocer las caras de las personas que salían. Una sirvienta las precedía.

—¿Quiénes son? —preguntó.

—Visitantes —exclamó Henry—, y ya es tarde para las visitas.

—Quizá es gente del pueblo que quiere ver los regalos de boda.

—No estoy en casa para los pueblerinos.

—Bueno, escóndete entre las ruinas y si puedo detenerlos, los detendré.

Henry le dio las gracias.

Margaret se acercó a los visitantes sonriendo socialmente. Suponía que serían invitados rezagados, que tendrían que conformarse con un sucedáneo de cortesía, porque Evie y Charles se habían ido, Henry estaba cansado y los demás en sus habitaciones. Margaret asumió los aires de anfitriona, pero no por mucho tiempo. Porque uno de los miembros del grupo era Helen, Helen vestida con sus ropas más viejas y dominada por aquella excitación tensa y retorcida que le había hecho ser, en su infancia, el terror del colegio.

—¿Qué pasa? —exclamó Margaret—, ¿qué ha sucedido? ¿Le ha pasado algo a Tibby?

Helen habló a sus dos acompañantes que retrocedieron. Luego se adelantó furiosa.

—¡Se están muriendo de hambre! —gritó—. Los encontré muertos de hambre.

—¿Quién? ¿Por qué has venido?

—¡Los Bast!

—¡Oh, Helen! —se lamentó Margaret—, ¿qué has hecho esta vez?

—Ha perdido su colocación. Le han echado del banco. Está en la ruina. Nosotros, las clases superiores, le hemos arruinado y ahora supongo que me dirás que es «la lucha por la vida». ¡Muertos de hambre! Su mujer está enferma, muerta de hambre. Se ha desmayado en el tren.

—Helen, ¿estás loca?

—Quizá. Sí, si quieres, estoy loca. Pero los he traído. No soporto más la injusticia. Quiero poner al descubierto toda la ruindad que existe bajo tanto lujo, tanto hablar de las fuerzas impersonales y tanta palabrería sobre un Dios que, en definitiva, hace lo que somos demasiado débiles para hacer por nosotros mismos.

—¿De veras has traído a dos personas hambrientas desde Londres hasta Shropshire, Helen?

Helen se controló. No había pensado en ello y su histeria se desvaneció.

—Había un vagón restaurante en el tren —dijo.

—No seas absurda. No se están muriendo de hambre, y tú lo sabes. Ahora empieza por el principio. No soporto la teatralidad. ¡Cómo te atreves! Sí, ¿cómo te atreves? —repitió mientras le iba dominando la ira—. Irrumpir en la boda de Evie de esta forma brutal... ¡Dios mío! Has pervertido el concepto de filantropía. Mira —señaló hacia la casa—, los criados, la gente asomada a las ventanas. Van a creer que se trata de un vulgar escándalo y tendré que darles una explicación: Oh, no, se trata de mi hermana, que está

chillando, y de dos menesterosos que se ha traído consigo por una incomprensible razón.

—Ten la bondad de retirar la palabra «menesterosos» —dijo Helen con amenazadora calma.

—Muy bien —concedió Margaret, que estaba decidida, a pesar de su ira, a evitar una pelea—. Yo también estoy desolada por su situación, pero no entiendo por qué los has traído o por qué has venido tú misma.

—Es nuestra última oportunidad de ver a míster Wilcox.

Margaret, al oír esto, caminó hacia la casa. No estaba dispuesta a molestar a Henry.

—Se va a Escocia y sé que ahora está aquí. Insisto en verle.

—De acuerdo, mañana.

—Sé que es nuestra última oportunidad.

—¿Cómo está usted, míster Bast? —dijo Margaret intentando controlar su tono de voz—. Un asunto extraño, ¿verdad? ¿Cuál es su opinión al respecto?

—También ha venido mistress Bast —apuntó Helen.

Margaret y Jacky se dieron la mano. Jacky, como su marido, era tímida y estaba enferma, pero además era tan rematadamente idiota que no alcanzaba a comprender lo que estaba sucediendo. Sólo sabía que una dama había caído sobre ellos como un ciclón la noche anterior, había pagado el alquiler, desempeñado los libros, invitado a una cena y a un desayuno y ordenado reunirse con ella en la estación de Paddington a la mañana siguiente. Leonard había protestado débilmente y, llegada la mañana, sugirió que no se presentasen. Pero Jacky, medio hipnotizada, obedeció. La dama les había dicho que fueran y tenían que ir. Y así su apartamento se había convertido en la estación de Paddington y la estación de Paddington, en un vagón de tren que se balanceaba y se volvía cada vez más caluroso y se desvanecía por completo para reaparecer entre torrentes de perfume caro. «Se ha desmayado usted —decía la voz de la dama agitada por el temor—, tal vez un poco de aire le siente bien.» Y tal vez sí que le sentó bien, porque ahí estaba, sintiéndose bastante mejor entre las flores del jardín.

—Le aseguro que no quiero inmiscuirme en sus asuntos —empezó diciendo Leonard en contestación a la pregunta de Margaret —, pero ustedes fueron tan amables tiempo atrás, cuando me advirtieron lo de la Porphyrion, que yo pensé... vaya, pensé que...

—Que podrías hacerle volver a la Porphyrion —ayudó Helen—. Meg, este asunto ha sido glorioso. Un brillante trabajo nocturno que empezó en el Chelsea Embankment.

Margaret agitó la cabeza y se volvió a míster Bast.

—No entiendo nada. Usted abandonó la Porphyrion porque le dijimos que era una mala empresa, ¿no es así?

—Exacto.

—Y entonces se fue usted a un Banco, ¿no?

—Ya te lo he contado —dijo Helen—; y luego redujeron el personal después de llevar un mes en el banco y ahora está sin un penique, por lo cual yo considero que nosotras y nuestro informante tenemos la culpa.

—La verdad es que esta situación me desagrada profundamente —murmuró Leonard.

—Eso espero, míster Bast. Pero no sirve de nada paliar las cosas. No se ha hecho usted un favor a sí mismo al venir aquí. Si tiene la intención de enfrentarse a míster Wilcox y pedirle cuentas por un comentario fortuito, cometerá usted una grave equivocación.

—Yo los traje. Toda la responsabilidad es mía —gritó Helen.

—Sólo puedo aconsejarles que se vayan de inmediato. Mi hermana les ha colocado en una posición incómoda y es mejor que se lo diga del modo más llano. Es demasiado tarde para volver a la ciudad, pero encontrarán ustedes un hotel muy cómodo en Oniton donde puede descansar mistress Bast y donde espero que serán ustedes mis invitados.

—No es esto lo que quiero, miss Schlegel —dijo Leonard—. Es usted sumamente amable, y sin duda mi posición es muy incómoda, pero ustedes me perjudicaron. Yo ya no valgo para nada.

—Lo que quiere es trabajo —interpretó Helen—, ¿no lo entiendes?

Entonces el joven dijo:

—Vámonos, Jacky. Damos más molestias de lo que valemos. Estamos costando libras y más libras a estas damas para que encuentren trabajo para nosotros y nunca lo encontrarán. No servimos para nada.

—Nos gustaría mucho encontrarle trabajo —dijo Margaret de un modo un poco convencional—. Nosotras bien quisiéramos... tanto mi hermana como yo. Lo que ocurre es que está usted pasando un bache. Váyase al hotel, descanse bien y algún día me pagará la factura, si lo prefiere.

Pero Leonard estaba próximo al abismo y en esos momentos los hombres ven las cosas con claridad.

—No sabe usted lo que dice —dijo—. Nunca encontraré trabajo. Si a los ricos no les va bien en una colocación, pueden probar en otra. Yo no. Yo tenía mi raíl y me he salido de él. Puedo trabajar en un determinado ramo de seguros en una oficina concreta lo suficientemente bien como para exigir un sueldo por mi trabajo, pero no más. La poesía no es nada, miss Schlegel. Lo que uno piensa sobre esto y sobre aquello no es nada. Quiero decir que si un hombre de más de veinte años abandona una vez su trabajo, ha terminado. He visto casos parecidos. Sus amigos les dieron dinero durante un tiempo, pero acabaron por quedarse en cuadro. No sirve. El mundo es así. Siempre ha habido ricos y pobres.

Se calló.

—¿Quieren comer algo? —dijo Margaret—. No sé qué hacer; ésta no es mi casa y, aunque a míster Wilcox le habría gustado saludarles en otro momento... como les digo, no sé qué hacer, pero haré lo que pueda por usted. Helen, ofréceles algo. Pruebe unos bocadillos, mistress Bast.

Se trasladaron a una larga mesa junto a la cual había aún un criado. Sobraban tartas heladas, innumerables bocadillos, café, copas de vino rosado, champán: los huéspedes, ahítos, no podían más. Leonard rehusó. Jacky dijo que se veía con ánimos de tomar algo. Margaret los dejó cuchicheando el uno con el otro y cambió unas palabras con Helen.

—Helen —dijo—, me gusta míster Bast. Estoy de acuerdo en que vale la pena ayudarle. Estoy de acuerdo en que somos directamente responsables de...

—No. Indirectamente responsables: vía míster Wilcox.

—Déjame que te diga de una vez por todas que si persistes en esta actitud, no haré nada. En pura lógica, están en lo cierto y tienes perfecto derecho a formular reproches contra Henry. Pero yo no los voy a aguantar, así que elije.

Helen contempló la puesta de sol.

—Si me prometes llevártelos tranquilamente al George, hablaré con Henry del asunto... A mi manera, tenlo bien presente. No habrá ningún altercado sobre la justicia. La justicia no tiene la menor utilidad. Si fuera sólo una cuestión de dinero podríamos apañarnos solas. Pero él quiere trabajo, nosotras no se lo podemos dar y es posible que Henry sí pueda.

—Tiene el deber de hacerlo —gruñó Helen.

—El deber me trae sin cuidado. Lo único que me interesa en este mundo es una serie de gente a la que conocemos y que las cosas que son como son sean un poco mejores. A míster Wilcox le repugna que le pidan favores, como a todos los hombres de negocios. Pero se lo voy a pedir, a riesgo de recibir un chasco, porque quiero que las cosas sean un poco mejor de lo que son.

—Muy bien, te doy mi palabra: tomaré las cosas con calma.

—Llévatelos al George y yo haré lo que pueda. ¡Pobre gente! Parecen cansados —cuando se separaban, añadió—: Sin embargo, Helen, aún no he terminado contigo. Has sido excesivamente impetuosa. No lo soporto, francamente. A medida que te haces mayor, en vez de tener más juicio, tienes menos. Piénsalo bien y cambia de manera de ser o no podremos vivir felices.

Volvió junto a Henry. Por suerte se había quedado sentado. El aspecto físico de la cuestión era importante.

—¿Eran lugareños? —preguntó saludándola con su agradable sonrisa.

—No lo vas a creer —dijo Margaret sentándose a su lado—. Ya está todo resuelto, pero era mi hermana.

—¿Está aquí Helen? —exclamó él disponiéndose a levantarse—. ¡Pero si había declinado la invitación! Yo creí que no le gustaban las bodas.

—No te levantes. No ha venido a la boda. La he empaquetado para el George.

Con su innato sentido de la hospitalidad, Henry protestó.

—No. Ha traído a dos de sus protegidos consigo y tiene que quedarse con ellos.

—Que vengan ellos también.

—Querido Henry, ¿tú los has visto?

—Vi una masa marrón que debía de ser una mujer, es cierto.

—Esa masa marrón era Helen, pero ¿viste la masa verde y salmón?

—¡Vaya!, ¿están de romería?

—No. Cuestión de negocios. Querían verme; más tarde hablaremos de ellos.

Margaret estaba avergonzada de su propia diplomacia. ¡Qué fácil resultaba al tratar con un Wilcox dejar de lado la camaradería y darles la imagen de la mujer que deseaban ver! Henry pescó la insinuación al vuelo y dijo:

—¿Por qué más tarde? Hablemos ahora mismo. El tiempo es oro.

—¿Quieres?

—Si no es muy largo...

—Oh, no, cinco minutos; pero al final de la historia hay un pincho, porque quiero que encuentres trabajo para un hombre en tu oficina.

—¿Qué categoría profesional tiene?

—No lo sé. Es administrativo.

—¿Qué edad?

—Veinticinco años, tal vez.

—¿Cómo se llama?

—Bast —dijo Margaret, y estuvo a punto de recordarle que se habían conocido en Wickham Place, pero se contuvo: no había sido un encuentro agradable.

—¿Dónde trabajaba antes?

—En el Dempster's Bank.

—¿Por qué lo dejó? —preguntó él sin recordar nada.

—Redujeron la plantilla.

—Muy bien, hablaré con él.

Era la recompensa al tacto y a la devoción dispensada por Margaret a lo largo de aquel día. En aquel momento Margaret comprendió por qué algunas mujeres prefieren la influencia a los derechos. Mistress Plynlimon, condenando a las *suffragettes*, había dicho: «La mujer que no puede influir en su marido para que vote como ella quiere debería sentirse avergonzada.» Margaret se había rebelado contra esta actitud, pero ahora estaba influyendo en Henry y, aunque se alegraba de su pequeña victoria, sabía que la había conseguido por los clásicos métodos de harem.

—Me alegraría mucho que lo admitieses —dijo—, aunque no sé si tendrá las aptitudes necesarias.

—Haré lo que pueda, pero no lo tomes como un precedente, Margaret.

—Desde luego que no, desde luego que no...

—No puedo recoger cada día a uno de tus protegidos. El negocio se resentiría.

—Te prometo que es el último. Se trata de... un caso especial.

—Los protegidos siempre lo son.

Margaret dejó las cosas como estaban. Henry se levantó con un ligero deje de complacencia y tendió la mano para ayudarla. ¡Qué profundo era el abismo que separaba al Henry verdadero del Henry que Helen imaginaba! Y ella, Margaret, estaba en medio, balanceándose como de costumbre, ora aceptando a los hombres tal y como eran, ora clamando con su hermana por la Verdad. Amor y Verdad: su lucha es eterna. Tal vez el mundo visible descansa sobre esta contradicción; tal vez si ambas fuerzas se reconciliasen la propia vida se desvanecería en el aire, como se desvanecieron los espíritus cuando Próspero se reconcilió con su hermano.

—Tu protegido ha hecho que nos retrasemos —dijo míster Wilcox—. Los Fussell deben de estar a punto de partir.

En conjunto, Margaret prefería a los hombres, tal y como eran. Henry salvaría a los Bast como había salvado Howards End, mientras Helen y sus amigas discutían sobre la ética de la salvación. El suyo era un método hecho de impulsos, pero el mundo había sido creado a golpes de impulso, y la belleza de la montaña, del río y de la puesta de sol quizá no fueran más que remiendos con los que el torpe artífice disimulara las junturas de su obra. Oniton, como la misma Margaret, era imperfecto: sus manzanos eran raquíticos, su castillo, ruinoso. Había sufrido también la lucha entre los anglosajones y los celtas: entre las cosas tal y como son y las cosas como deberían ser. Una vez más el poniente retrocedía y las ordenadas estrellas moteaban un cielo levantino. Ciertamente, no hay descanso para los seres humanos sobre la tierra. Pero sí hay felicidad, y Margaret sintió, mientras descendía del montículo del brazo de su amado, que estaba recibiendo su porción de felicidad.

Para su disgusto, mistress Bast todavía estaba en el jardín. Helen y su marido la habían dejado allí para que terminase de comer mientras iban a reservar habitaciones. Margaret encontró a la mujer repelente. Cuando estrechaba su mano había sentido una agobiante vergüenza. Recordó el motivo de su visita a Wickham Place y volvió a percibir el tufo del abismo: tufo tanto más turbador cuanto que era involuntario. Porque no había malicia en Jacky. Ahí estaba, sentada con un trozo de pastel en una mano y una copa de champán vacía en la otra, sin hacer mal a nadie.

—Está fatigada —susurró Margaret.

—Algo más —dijo Henry—. Esto no puede ser. No puedo consentir que siga en mi jardín en este estado.

—¿Está...? —Margaret vaciló antes de añadir «borracha». Ahora que estaba a punto de casarse con él, Henry se había vuelto muy quisquilloso. Desaprobaba las conversaciones osadas.

Henry se acercó a la mujer. Ella levantó la cara, que brillaba como un hongo a la luz del ocaso.

—Señora, se sentirá usted mejor en el hotel —dijo secamente.

—¡Pero si es Hen! —replicó Jacky.

—*Ne crois pas que le mari lui ressemble* —se disculpó Margaret —. *Il est tout à fait différent.*

—¡Henry! —repitió Jacky explícitamente.

Míster Wilcox estaba molesto.

—No puedo felicitarte por tus protegidos —recalcó.

—Hen, no te vayas. Tú me quieres, ¿verdad, cariño?

—¡Cielo santo, qué persona! —suspiró Margaret recogiéndose el borde de la falda.

Jacky apuntó hacia míster Wilcox con el pastel.

—Eres un buen chico, ya lo creo —bostezó—. ¿Sabes una cosa? Te quiero.

—Henry, lo lamento.

—¿Se puede saber qué lamentas? —preguntó él mirándola tan fijamente que Margaret temió que estuviese enfermo. Parecía más escandalizado de lo que los hechos requerían.

—Haberte traído esto.

—Te ruego que no te disculpes.

La voz continuaba: «Hen.»

—¿Por qué te llama Hen? —dijo Margaret con toda su inocencia —. ¿Os conocíais ya?

—¿Que si conozco a Hen? —dijo Jacky—. ¿Y quién no conoce a Hen? Ahora está contigo como antes conmigo, querida. ¡Estos chicos! Ya verás, ya... y, sin embargo, los queremos, ¿verdad que sí?

—¿Estás satisfecha? —preguntó Henry.

Margaret empezó a sentirse horrorizada.

—No sé de qué se trata —dijo—. Entremos en la casa.

Pero él creyó que estaba fingiendo, pensó que estaba atrapado, sintió que su vida se derrumbaba.

—¿De veras que no lo sabes? —dijo en tono incisivo—. Pues yo sí que lo sé. Permíteme que te felicite por el éxito de tu plan.

—Es el plan de Helen, no el mío.

—Ahora comprendo tu interés en los Bast. Muy bien pensado.

Me divierte tu cautela, Margaret. Tenías razón... era necesario. Soy un hombre y tengo un pasado de hombre. Es para mí un honor

considerarte libre de tu compromiso.

Margaret seguía sin entender. Conocía el lado oculto de la vida en teoría, pero no podía comprenderlo cuando se le presentaba como un hecho. Hicieron falta más palabras de Jacky, palabras inequívocas e irrefutadas.

—Así que... —se separó de ella y corrió adentro. Se contuvo.

—¿Así que qué? —preguntó el coronel Fussell que se disponía a salir.

—Estábamos discutiendo... Henry y yo acabamos de sostener una discusión. Yo opinaba que... —tomó el abrigo de piel del coronel de manos de un criado y se ofreció a ayudarle. El coronel protestó y ambos representaron una pequeña comedia.

—Permítame que lo haga yo —dijo Henry, que la seguía.

—¡Muchas gracias! ¿Lo ve usted, coronel? Ya me ha perdonado.

—Supongo que no había mucho que perdonar —dijo el coronel con galantería.

Subió al coche. Las damas le siguieron al cabo de un rato. Las criadas, el guía y el equipaje pesado habían sido enviados antes por una línea secundaria. Todavía charlando, todavía dando las gracias a su anfitrión y manifestando sus buenos deseos a su futura anfitriona, los huéspedes se alejaron.

Margaret continuó:

—¿Así que esa mujer ha sido tu querida?

—Lo acabas de decir con tu habitual delicadeza —replicó él.

—¿Cuándo?

—¿Por qué?

—Dime, por favor, ¿cuándo?

—Hace diez años.

Margaret se marchó sin decir palabra. Porque no era su tragedia, sino la de mistress Wilcox.

CAPÍTULO XXVII

Helen empezó a preguntarse por qué se habría gastado la suma de ocho libras en hacer enfermar a unas personas y en enfurecer a otras. Ahora que la ola de excitación se retiraba y les dejaba, a ella, a míster Bast y a mistress Bast, varados durante una noche en un hotel de Shropshire, se preguntaba a sí misma qué fuerzas habían engendrado aquella ola. En cualquier caso, no se había causado ningún mal. Margaret cumpliría bien su cometido y, aunque Helen desaprobaba los métodos de su hermana, sabía que los Bast se beneficiarían de ellos a largo plazo.

—Míster Wilcox es muy ilógico —explicó a Leonard, que había acostada a su mujer y estaba sentado con Helen en el saloncito vacío—. Si le hubiésemos dicho que su deber era darle a usted una colocación, se habría negado. Al fin y al cabo, todo estriba en que no es una persona realmente educada. No quisiera ponerle a usted en su contra, pero ya verá qué calvario es tratar con él.

—Nunca se lo agradeceré bastante, miss Schlegel —fue todo lo que Leonard pudo decir.

—Yo creo en la responsabilidad personal. ¿Usted no? Lo creo que todo es personal. Me repugna... No debería decirlo, pero estoy convencida de que los Wilcox han escogido el mal camino. Es posible que no sea culpa suya. Quizá les falta en el fondo de sus cabezas esa cosita que dice «YO» y, en tal caso, culparles es perder el tiempo. Existe una teoría de pesadilla, según la cual acaba de nacer una raza especial que nos gobernará en el futuro, precisamente porque carece de esta cosita que dice «YO». ¿La conoce?

—No tengo tiempo para leer.

—¿Pero no ha pensado en ello? Quiero decir si ha pensado que existen dos clases de personas: nuestra clase, la que vive a partir del fondo de la mente; y la otra, la que no puede, porque sus mentes no tienen fondo. No pueden decir «YO». En realidad, *no existen* y por ello son superhombres. Pierpont Morgan no ha dicho «YO» en toda su vida.

Leonard se despabiló. Si su benefactora quería conversación intelectual, la tendría. Ella era más importante ahora que su pasado ruinoso.

—Nunca pude entender a Nietzsche —dijo—. Pero siempre entendí que esos superhombres eran más bien lo que podríamos llamar unos egoístas.

—Oh, no, está usted equivocado —replicó Helen—. Ningún superhombre ha dicho jamás: «yo quiero», porque «yo quiero» podría llevarle a preguntarse: «¿y quién soy Yo?» y de ahí a la Piedad y a la Justicia. El superhombre sólo dice: «Quiero.» Si es Napoleón, «Quiero Europa»; si es Barba Azul, «Quiero mujeres»; si es Pierpont Morgan, «Quiero a Botticelli». Nunca el «YO». Y si pudiera usted penetrar en su interior, sólo encontraría en el fondo pánico y vacío.

Leonard guardó silencio durante un rato. Luego dijo:

—¿Puedo asumir, miss Schlegel, que usted y yo somos de la clase de personas que dicen «YO»?

—Desde luego.

—¿Y su hermana también?

—Desde luego —repitió Helen en un tono un poco cortante. Estaba molesta con Margaret, pero no estaba dispuesta a que se la pusiera en tela de juicio—. Toda la gente presentable dice «YO».

—Quizá míster Wilcox no es...

—No creo que valga la pena hablar de míster Wilcox.

—Conforme, conforme —admitió Leonard. Helen se preguntó a sí misma por qué le había parado los pies. Una o dos veces le había incitado a criticar, a lo largo de aquel día, para luego echarle el freno. ¿Temía que se volviera presuntuoso? En tal caso, era detestable por su parte.

Pero Leonard consideraba aquel desaire como algo natural. Todo lo que ella hacía era natural e incapaz de ofender. En tanto que las dos miss Schlegel estaban juntas, él las había considerado como algo apenas humano: una especie de tiovivo admonitorio. Pero una miss Schlegel sola era distinto. En el caso de Helen, era una mujer soltera; en el de Margaret, una mujer a punto de casarse; en ningún caso una hermana era el eco de la otra. Se había hecho la luz en el mundo de los ricos y Leonard había vislumbrado que estaba lleno de hombres y mujeres, algunos de los cuales eran más amistosos con él que otros. Helen se había convertido en «su» miss Schlegel, la que le reñía y mantenía correspondencia con él, la que había acudido a él el día anterior con una vehemencia digna de gratitud. Margaret, aunque no era mala, era severa y remota. A él jamás se le ocurriría ayudarla, por ejemplo. Nunca le había gustado y empezaba a pensar que aquella primera impresión era correcta y que a su hermana tampoco le gustaba Margaret. Sin duda Helen estaba sola. Ella, que daba tanto, recibía bien poco a cambio. Leonard se sintió satisfecho al pensar que podía ahorrarle una humillación callándose y ocultando lo que sabía de míster Wilcox. Jacky le había anunciado su descubrimiento cuando Leonard la recogió en el jardín. Tras la primera impresión, el asunto no le importó por sí mismo. A aquellas alturas no le quedaban muchas ilusiones respecto a su mujer y aquello era solamente una nueva mancha en la cara de un amor que nunca había sido puro. En el futuro su ideal sería conservar perfecta la imperfección, suponiendo que el futuro le diera tiempo de tener ideales. Helen, y Margaret a causa de Helen, debían ignorarlo.

Helen le desconcertó al derivar la conversación hacia su mujer.

—Mistress Bast, ¿dice «YO»? —le preguntó ella, un si es no es maliciosamente, y luego—: ¿Está fatigada?

—Es mejor que se quede en su habitación —dijo Leonard.

—¿Quiere que vaya a hacerle compañía?

—No, gracias, no necesita compañía.

—Míster Bast, ¿qué clase de mujer es su esposa?

Leonard enrojeció hasta la raíz del cabello.

—Ya debería conocer mis modales a estas alturas. ¿Le ha ofendido la pregunta?

—No, no, de ningún modo, miss Schlegel.

—Me gusta la honradez. No finja que su matrimonio ha sido un matrimonio feliz. Usted y ella no tienen nada en común.

Leonard no lo negó, pero dijo con timidez:

—Supongo que esto es evidente, pero Jacky nunca quiso hacer mal a nadie. Cuando las cosas empezaron a torcerse, cuando me fui enterando de... cosas, solía pensar que era culpa suya. Ahora, sin embargo, recordándolo, me doy cuenta de que era culpa mía. No tenía que haberme casado con ella, pero ya que lo hice, debo permanecer a su lado y mantenerla.

—¿Cuántos años llevan casados?

—Casi tres.

—¿Qué dijeron sus familiares?

—No quieren saber nada de nosotros. Tuvieron una especie de consejo de familia cuando se enteraron de que me había casado y rompieron definitivamente con nosotros.

Helen empezó a pasear arriba y abajo de la habitación.

—Amigo mío, ¡menudo embrollo! —dijo suavemente—. ¿Quiénes son sus familiares?

A eso sí podía contestar. Sus padres, que ya habían muerto, habían sido comerciantes; sus hermanas se habían casado con viajantes de comercio; su hermano era sacristán.

—¿Y sus abuelos?

Leonard le confesó un secreto que había mantenido oculto por vergüenza hasta entonces.

—No eran nada —dijo—: agricultores y cosas por el estilo.

—¿Ah, sí? ¿De qué parte?

—La mayoría eran de Lincolnshire, pero el padre de mi madre... fíjese qué curioso, procedía de esta parte, de aquí.

—¿De Shropshire? Sí que es curioso. Los parientes de mi madre eran de Lancashire. Pero, ¿qué tenían que objetar sus hermanos a

mistress Bast?

—¡Oh!..., no lo sé.

—Perdone que se lo diga, pero sí que lo sabe. No soy una niña, puedo oír cualquier cosa que tenga que contarme, y cuanto más me cuente, más podré ayudarle. ¿Oyeron decir algo contra ella?

Leonard guardó silencio.

—Ya me imagino —dijo Helen con gravedad.

—No creo, miss Schlegel; espero que no.

—Tenemos que ser sinceros, incluso respecto a estas cosas. Lo he adivinado. Lo siento muchísimo, pero ello no implica ninguna diferencia. Todo sigue igual con respecto a ustedes dos. No culpo a las mujeres de estas cosas, sino a los hombres.

Leonard dejó las cosas como estaban, con tal de que no adivinase quién era el hombre. Helen se detuvo junto a la ventana y levantó lentamente las cortinas. El hotel daba a una plazoleta oscura. La neblina había comenzado. Cuando se volvió hacia él le brillaban los ojos.

—No se apene —rogó él—. No podría soportarlo. Todo irá bien si encuentro trabajo. Si pudiera encontrar un trabajo... un trabajo permanente, nada volvería a ser tan triste como ha sido hasta ahora. Ya no me interesan los libros como antes. Estoy convencido de que con un trabajo permanente podríamos estabilizarnos de nuevo. Eso hace que uno deje de pensar.

—¿Estabilizarse en qué?

—Simplemente estabilizarse.

—¡Y a esto le llama usted vida! —dijo Helen con un nudo en la garganta—. ¿Cómo puede usted decir... con todas las cosas maravillosas que existen por ver y por hacer... con la música... con los paseos nocturnos...?

—Los paseos están muy bien cuando se tiene trabajo —respondió Leonard—. En cierta ocasión dije un montón de tonterías, pero no hay nada como ver a un oficial de juzgado en casa para olvidarse de ellas. Cuando le vi manosear mis libros de Ruskin y de Stevenson, vi la vida tal y como es, y le aseguro que no es una visión agradable. Ahora mis libros están otra vez en su sitio gracias

a usted, pero nunca volverán a ser lo que fueron para mí; y nunca volveré a pensar que la noche en el bosque es maravillosa.

—¿Por qué no? —dijo Helen cerrando violentamente la ventana.

—Porque ahora comprendo que hay que tener dinero.

—Está usted en un error.

—Ojalá estuviera en un error, pero, mire, el sacerdote tiene dinero propio o lo recibe de sus feligreses; el poeta y el músico, tres cuartos de lo mismo; el vagabundo, otro tanto. El vagabundo acude al final de su vida al asilo y se le paga con dinero de los demás. Miss Schlegel, lo único real es el dinero, todo lo demás es un sueño.

—Continúa usted en un error. Ha olvidado la Muerte.

Leonard no entendía.

—Si viviéramos eternamente, lo que usted dice sería cierto. Pero hemos de morir, hemos de dejar esta vida. La injusticia y la ambición serían lo único real si viviéramos eternamente, pero tal como son las cosas, hemos de ocuparnos de algo más, porque la Muerte se aproxima. Me gusta la Muerte, no de un modo morboso, sino por lo que tiene de explicación total. La Muerte explica la vaciedad del dinero. La Muerte y el Dinero son los eternos enemigos. No la Vida y la Muerte. No importa lo que exista después de la Muerte, míster Bast; tenga por seguro que el poeta, el músico y el vagabundo serán más felices que el hombre que nunca ha aprendido a decir: «Yo soy.»

—Lo dudo.

—Estamos todos sumergidos en la niebla, lo sé, pero en este sentido algo le puedo decir: los hombres como los Wilcox están más sumergidos en la niebla que ningún otro. ¡Ah, los sanos y sensatos ingleses, que construyen imperios y nivelan el mundo con lo que ellos llaman sentido común! Nómbreles la Muerte y se ofenderán, porque la muerte es auténticamente imperial y se lo grita a la cara constantemente.

—Yo temo tanto a la muerte como cualquiera.

—Sí, pero no a la idea de la Muerte.

—¿Cuál es la diferencia?

—Una diferencia infinita —dijo Helen con mayor gravedad que antes.

Leonard la miró interrogativamente y tuvo conciencia de que surgían grandes cosas de la noche tenebrosa, pero no podía percibirlas porque su corazón seguía lleno de cosas pequeñas. Como la vez que perdió su paraguas en el concierto del Queen's Hall, la pérdida reciente había obstruido la visión de la divina armonía. La Muerte, la Vida y el Materialismo eran hermosas palabras, pero ¿le admitiría míster Wilcox en su empresa como administrativo? Dijera lo que dijese míster Wilcox era un rey en su mundo, un superhombre, con su propia moral y con la cabeza invisible, más allá de las nubes.

—Debo de ser un idiota —dijo a modo de disculpa.

Para Helen, en cambio, la paradoja se le aparecía con toda claridad: «La Muerte destruye al hombre; la idea de la Muerte, le redime.» Más allá de los ataúdes y los esqueletos que anidan en las mentes vulgares se oculta algo tan inmenso que todo lo que hay de grande en nosotros responde a su llamada. Los hombres retroceden ante la imagen del sepulcro en el que entrarán algún día, pero el Amor sabe algo más: la Muerte es su enemigo, pero es también su caballero andante; en el transcurso de su combate secular, los músculos del Amor se han fortalecido y su vista se ha aclarado de tal modo que su presencia se ha vuelto irresistible.

—Nunca abandone —continuó diciendo ella, y repitió una y otra vez la vaga pero convincente tesis de que lo Invisible se aloja en lo Visible. Su excitación fue en aumento cuando intentó cortar las amarras que unían a Leonard a la tierra, pero éstas, trenzadas por la amarga experiencia, se le resistían. En aquel momento entró un criado y le entregó una carta de parte de Margaret. Dentro llevaba otra nota dirigida a Leonard. Las leyeron con los murmullos del río como fondo.

CAPÍTULO XXVIII

Durante muchas horas Margaret permaneció inerte; luego volvió a hacerse con el control de sí misma y escribió varias cartas. Se sentía demasiado abatida para hablar con Henry. Podía sentir piedad por él; incluso estaba decidida a casarse con él, pero en aquellos momentos los acontecimientos habían calado demasiado hondo en su corazón para hablarle. En la superficie, el sentimiento de humillación era demasiado fuerte. No tenía dominio de su voz ni de su mirada, y las dulces palabras que forzaba a escribir a su pluma parecían proceder de otra persona.

«Me querido amigo —empezó—, esto no tiene que separarnos. Estas cosas lo son todo o no son nada, y yo quiero que no sean nada. Sucedió mucho antes de conocernos y, aunque hubiera sucedido después, espero que ahora estaría escribiendo lo mismo. Te comprendo.»

Tachó «te comprendo»; sonaba a falso. Henry no soportaría que le comprendieran. También tachó «estas cosas lo son todo o no son nada». A Henry le molestaría un concepto tan fuerte de la situación. No debía comentar; comentar no es femenino.

—Creo que así ya está bien —pensó.

Entonces el sentimiento de humillación la ahogó. ¿Merecía Henry tantas preocupaciones? Haber cedido a la tentación de una mujer como aquélla lo era todo, claro que sí, y Margaret no podía casarse con él. Intentó transpolar la tentación a su propio lenguaje y la cabeza le dio vueltas. Los hombres debían de ser distintos, incluso a la hora de ceder ante tentaciones como ésa. Desfalleció su fe en la camaradería y vio la vida como aquel salón vidrioso de la Great Western, cuyos cristales protegían del frío a hombres y

mujeres. ¿Son los sexos realmente razas distintas, cada una con su propio código de moral, y el amor mutuo un mero instrumento de la Naturaleza para hacer que las cosas continúen? ¿A eso se reducen las relaciones humanas desnudadas de sus apariencias? Su raciocinio le decía que no. Sabía que del instrumento de la Naturaleza los hombres han hecho algo mágico, algo que les ha valido la inmortalidad. Mucho más misteriosa que la atracción de los sexos es la ternura que ponemos en esa atracción; es más profundo el abismo que nos separa de la granja reproductora que el que separa a la granja reproductora de los piensos con que se alimentan los animales. Evolucionamos de un modo que la Ciencia no puede medir y cuyo fin la Teología no se atreve a afrontar. «El hombre produjo esta joya», dirán lo dioses y, al decirlo, nos concederán la inmortalidad. Margaret lo sabía, pero, por el momento, no podía sentirlo y transformaba el matrimonio de Evie y míster Cahill en un carnaval de locos, y su propio matrimonio en... Demasiado triste para pensar en ello, rompió la carta y escribió otra.

Apreciado míster Bast:

Tal como le prometí, he hablado con míster Wilcox de su asunto y lamento comunicarle que no hay un empleo vacante para usted.

Atentamente,

M. J. SCHLEGEL

La metió en el sobre que contenía una nota dirigida a Helen, para escribir la cual tomó menos precauciones de las que habría

debido tomar. Pero le dolía la cabeza y no podía detenerse a seleccionar las palabras.

Querida Helen:

Dale esto a él. Los Bast no nos interesan. Henry encontró a la mujer borracha en el jardín. Te tengo preparada una habitación, haz el favor de venir en cuanto recibas esta nota. Los Bast no son la clase de gente que merece nuestro interés. Mañana por la mañana iré yo misma a verles y haré lo que sea justo.

M.

Al escribir estas líneas, Margaret creía estar actuando con sentido práctico. Algo haría por los Bast más adelante, pero por el momento, había que silenciarlos. Margaret esperaba evitar una conversación entre la mujer y Helen. Tocó el timbre, pero no acudió ningún criado a la llamada. Míster Wilcox y los Warrington se habían ido a dormir. En consecuencia, ella misma fue al George. No entró en el hotel, pues una discusión habría sido peligrosa, de modo que, recalcando que se trataba de una carta importante, se la dio a una sirvienta. Cuando cruzó la plaza en sentido inverso, de regreso a casa, vio a Helen y a míster Bast asomados a la ventana del salón y temió haber llegado tarde. Su labor aún no había terminado; tenía que contarle a Henry lo que había hecho.

Esto le resultó fácil, pues se encontró con él en el vestíbulo. El viento hacía tabletear unos cuadros contra la pared y el ruido le había despertado.

—¿Quién anda ahí? —preguntó míster Wilcox con aires de señor de la mansión.

Margaret entró y pasó junto a él.

—Le he dicho a Helen que venga a dormir a esta casa —dijo—. Estará mejor aquí. Así que, por favor, no cierres la puerta de entrada.

—Creí que había entrado alguien —dijo Henry.

—Al mismo tiempo le dije a ese hombre que no podíamos hacer nada por él. No sé qué haremos más adelante, pero ahora los Bast tienen que irse.

—¿Dices que al final tu hermana viene a dormir aquí?

—Probablemente.

—¿Irá a tu habitación?

—Como es natural, no tengo nada que decirle. Me voy a la cama. ¿Quieres decirle a los criados lo de Helen? ¿Puede ir alguien a recoger su equipaje?

Henry hizo sonar el pequeño gong especialmente adquirido para llamar al servicio.

—Tendrás que hacer más ruido si quieres que te oigan.

Henry abrió la puerta y del fondo del pasillo le llegaron gritos y carcajadas.

—Demasiado alboroto —dijo echando a caminar hacia ellos.

Margaret subió a su habitación, dudando entre alegrarse por el encuentro o lamentarlo. Se habían comportado como si nada hubiese ocurrido y su más profundo instinto le decía que eso había sido un error. Por él mismo, tenía que darle alguna explicación.

Sin embargo, ¿qué podía aclarar una explicación? Una fecha, un lugar, unos pocos detalles que Margaret ya imaginaba con excesiva claridad. Ahora que la primera impresión había pasado, comprendía que existían todas las premisas para producir el corolario de una mistress Bast. La vida interior de Henry no tenía secretos para

Margaret desde hacía tiempo: su confusión intelectual, su cerrazón a la influencia ajena, sus pasiones intensas pero furtivas. ¿Debía ahora rechazarlo porque su vida exterior era congruente con su vida interior? Quizá. Quizá si el deshonor hubiera recaído sobre ella; pero todo había sucedido mucho antes de conocerla. Margaret luchó contra los sentimientos. Se dijo a sí misma que la ofensa hecha a mistress Wilcox le afectaba también a ella. Pero Margaret no era de las que se pierden en la maraña estéril de la teoría. Mientras se desvestía, su ira, su respeto por los muertos, sus deseos de provocar una escena se debilitaron. Henry podía ser como quisiera, porque le quería, y algún día utilizaría el amor para hacer de él un hombre mejor.

La piedad anidaba en el fondo de sus acciones a lo largo de toda la crisis. La piedad, si se me permite generalizar, anida en el fondo de todas las mujeres. Cuando un hombre nos aprecia, nos aprecia por nuestras buenas cualidades y por profundo que sea su aprecio, cuando nos hacemos indignos de él, nos abandona inexorablemente. Por el contrario, la indignidad estimula a las mujeres. Hace emerger lo más hondo que hay en ellas, para bien o para mal.

Ahí estaba el meollo de la cuestión. Había que perdonar a Henry y mejorarle por medio del amor; todo lo demás carecía de importancia. Había que olvidar la ofensa perpetrada contra mistress Wilcox, ese inquieto pero entrañable fantasma. Para Margaret todo alcanzaba ahora su proporción. Debía sentir piedad por el hombre que recorría la vida de ambas mujeres. ¿Tuvo noticia mistress Wilcox del desliz de su marido? Interesante pregunta. Pero Margaret se quedó dormida, encadenada por el afecto y mecida por los murmullos del río que descendía incesantemente por el país de Gales. Se sintió una con su futuro hogar, tiñéndolo y siendo teñida por él, y se despertó para ver por segunda vez el castillo de Oniton conquistando la neblina matutina.

CAPÍTULO XXIX

-Henry, querido... —fue su saludo.

Henry acababa de terminar su desayuno y estaba empezando a leer el *Times.* Su cuñada estaba haciendo el equipaje. Margaret se arrodilló a su lado y le arrebató el periódico, sintiéndolo insólitamente pesado y grueso. Luego, colocando la cara donde antes había estado el periódico, miró a Henry a los ojos.

—Henry, querido, mírame. No, no permitiré que me huyas. Mírame, así. Eso es.

—Te refieres a lo de ayer por la noche —dijo él con voz ronca—. Dejé sin efecto tu compromiso. Podría encontrar excusas, pero no lo haré. No y mil veces no. Soy un mal sujeto y así me has de dejar.

Expulsado de su antigua fortaleza, míster Wilcox estaba edificando una nueva. Ya no podía aparentar respetabilidad ante ella. Así que se defendía en un pasado escabroso. No había en él arrepentimiento sincero.

—Puedes ser lo que quieras, amigo mío. Nada nos estorbará: sé lo que estoy diciendo y este asunto no cambiará las cosas.

—¿No cambiará las cosas? —preguntó él—. ¿No cambiará las cosas ahora que has descubierto que no soy la clase de persona que tú creías que era? —estaba desconcertado por aquella miss Schlegel. Habría preferido verla destrozada por el golpe o incluso iracunda. Contra la marea de su pecado fluía el sentimiento de que ella no era totalmente femenina. Sus ojos miraban demasiado de frente; esos ojos habían leído libros que sólo eran adecuados para hombres. Y aunque él había temido una escena y ella estaba decidida a evitarla, se produjo una escena. Era algo imperativo.

—No soy digno de ti —empezó él—. Si lo fuera no te habría liberado de tu compromiso. Sé lo que me digo. Y no soporto hablar de estas cosas. Será mejor que lo dejemos correr.

Margaret besó su mano. Él la retiró rápidamente y levantándose prosiguió:

—Tú y tu vida a cubierto, tus objetivos refinados, tus amistades, tus libros, tú y tu hermana, y las mujeres como tú... No sé... ¿Cómo podéis imaginar las tentaciones que rodean a un hombre?

—Nos resulta difícil —dijo Margaret—, pero si lo consideramos digno de casarnos con él, las imaginamos.

—Separados de la sociedad decente y de los vínculos familiares, ¿qué crees que sucede a miles de sujetos en el extranjero? Aislados, sin nadie a quien recurrir. Lo sé por experiencia, una triste experiencia. Y tú aún dices que «eso no cambia las cosas».

—Para mí, no.

Henry se rió con amargura. Margaret se fue al aparador y se sirvió una de las bandejas de desayuno. Como había sido la última en bajar, apagó el infiernillo de alcohol que las mantenía calientes. Era tierna, pero seria. Sabía que Henry no estaba confesándose sino señalando la separación que existe entre el alma de los hombres y la de las mujeres y no quería oírle exponer este extremo.

—¿Vino Helen? —preguntó. Henry dijo que no con la cabeza.

—¡Vaya, esto sí que es un desastre! Hay que impedir que chismorree con mistress Bast.

—¡Cielo santo! ¡No! —exclamó él recobrando súbitamente la naturalidad. Luego se dominó—. Dejémoslos que chismorreen. Mi juego ha terminado; te agradezco tu generosidad... en la medida en que pueda tener algún valor mi gratitud.

—¿No envió ningún recado o algo por el estilo?

—No, que yo sepa.

—¿Quieres hacer el favor de tocar el timbre?

—¿Para qué?

—Para hacer averiguaciones.

Tocó el timbre con teatral exageración, se oyó un repiqueteo, Margaret se echó más té. El mayordomo entró y dijo que miss Schlegel había dormido en el George, según sus noticias. ¿Querían que fuese al George?

—Yo iré, gracias —dijo Margaret ordenándole que se retirase.

—Es inútil —dijo Henry—. Dejemos que las cosas sigan su curso, no se puede detener una historia una vez ha empezado. He conocido casos similares de otros hombres... Entonces los despreciaba, creía que yo era distinto, que yo nunca cedería a la tentación. Oh, Margaret... —se sentó junto a ella, improvisando emociones. Margaret no podía soportarlo—. A todos nos sucede una vez en la vida. ¿Me creerás? Hay momentos en que aún el hombre más fuerte... «El que se crea a salvo, tenga cuidado en no caer», ¿no es así? Si tú supieras, me perdonarías. Estaba lejos de las influencias beneficiosas, lejos incluso de Inglaterra. Estaba muy solo, muy solo y necesitaba una voz femenina. Ya basta. Ya te he contado demasiado para que me perdones.

—Sí, querido, ya basta.

—Fue... —bajó la voz—... fue un infierno.

Margaret sopesó seriamente esta afirmación. ¿Lo fue? ¿De verdad había padecido Henry la tortura de los remordimientos? ¿O había sido el clásico «¡Bueno, se acabó! Volvamos a la vida respetable»? Más bien esto último, o Margaret no le conocía bien. Un hombre que ha pasado por un infierno no se vanagloria de su virilidad. Es humilde y la oculta, si de verdad aún le queda. Sólo en las leyendas el pecador resurge, penitente pero terrible, para conquistar a la mujer pura con su irresistible poder. Henry estaba ansioso de ser terrible, pero no lo conseguía. Era el clásico inglés medio que ha cometido un desliz. El único punto verdaderamente culposo, su infidelidad a mistress Wilcox, en ningún momento pareció afectarle. Margaret deseaba mencionar a mistress Wilcox.

Poco a poco le contó la historia. Era una historia muy simple. Diez años atrás fue la fecha; el lugar, una guarnición en Chipre. De vez en cuando Henry le preguntaba a Margaret si podría perdonarle y Margaret respondía: «Ya te he perdonado, Henry.» Margaret escogía sus palabras cuidadosamente para evitarle el pánico y representó el papel de ingenua hasta que él hubo reedificado su

fortaleza y ocultado su alma al mundo. Cuando el mayordomo entró a retirar el desayuno, Henry había cambiado de humor: preguntó al sirviente a qué venía tanta prisa y se quejó del ruido de la noche anterior en el ala del servicio. Margaret observó con interés al mayordomo. Era un hombre guapo y como tal ligeramente atractivo para ella en tanto que mujer; un atractivo tan leve que apenas le resultaba perceptible, sin embargo, el mundo se habría venido abajo si hubiese mencionado este hecho a Henry.

A su vuelta del George, las obras de reedificación estaban terminadas y el antiguo Henry se enfrentó a ella, competente, cínico y amable. Se había lavado el alma, había sido perdonado y lo importante ahora era olvidar su fallo y enviarlo a reunirse con otras inversiones desafortunadas. Jacky había seguido el camino de Howards End, de Ducie Street, del automóvil bermellón, de los dólares argentinos y de las personas y las cosas que «nunca le había servido de mucho y menos ahora». Su recuerdo le coartaba. Apenas pudo prestar atención a Margaret que traía nuevas inquietantes del George: Helen y sus protegidos se habían ido.

—Bueno, que se vayan. Quiero decir ese hombre y esa mujer, claro está, porque a tu hermana, cuanto más la veamos, mejor.

—Se han ido por separado. Helen, muy temprano y los Bast poco antes de mi llegada. No ha dejado ningún recado ni contestado a mis notas. No me gusta el significado de todo esto.

—¿Qué les decías en tus notas?

—Ya te lo dije ayer por la noche.

—¡Ah, sí! ¿Te apetece dar una vuelta por el jardín, querida?

Margaret le tomó del brazo. El tiempo espléndido le produjo un efecto sedante. Pero los engranajes de la boda de Evie todavía estaban en funcionamiento alejando a los huéspedes tan sordamente como los había traído y Margaret no pudo estar con Henry mucho rato. Estaba convenido que irían en coche hasta Shrewsbury y a partir de ahí, él se iría al Norte y ella regresaría a Londres con los Warrington. Durante un rato Margaret fue feliz; luego su cerebro empezó a funcionar de nuevo.

—Me temo que hayan chismorreado de un modo u otro en el George. Helen no se habría ido a menos que se hubiera enterado de

algo. Llevé mal el asunto. Todo es una calamidad. Debí haberla separado de aquella mujer al instante.

—¡Margaret! —exclamó él soltando su mano con emoción.

—¿Sí, Henry?

—Nunca he sido un santo... más bien todo lo contrario, pero tú me has aceptado para lo bueno y para lo malo. Lo pasado, pasado está. Has prometido perdonarme. Margaret, una promesa es una promesa. Nunca vuelvas a mencionar a esa mujer.

—Salvo por razones prácticas, nunca.

—¡Por razones prácticas! ¿Tú hablas de razones prácticas?

—Sí, soy una persona práctica —murmuró Margaret, pero los temores de ésta inquietaron a Henry. No era la primera vez que se veía amenazado de chantaje. Era rico y se le suponía intachable; los Bast sabían que fallaba en lo último y tal vez decidieran sacar provecho de sus conocimientos.

—En cualquier caso, no debes preocuparte —dijo él—. Éste es un asunto de hombres —pensó intensamente—. No lo menciones a nadie bajo ningún concepto.

Margaret enrojeció al oír un consejo tan elemental, pero Henry estaba preparando el camino para una mentira. Si fuera necesario, negaría incluso haber conocido a mistress Bast y se querellaría por injurias. Quizá nunca la había conocido. Ahí estaba Margaret, que se comportaba como si no la hubiera conocido. Ahí estaba la casa. A su alrededor había media docena de jardineros que limpiaban los restos de la boda de su hija. Todo parecía tan sólido y cabal que el pasado voló fuera de su vista, como una persiana que se enrolla dejando a la vista los últimos cinco minutos y nada más.

Considerándolo así, vio que el coche estaría dispuesto para partir en los próximos cinco minutos y se puso en acción. Se golpearon gongs, se impartieron órdenes; envió a Margaret a vestirse y a la sirvienta a que limpiase el reguero de hierba que Margaret había dejado en el vestíbulo. Como el Hombre es al Universo, así la mente de míster Wilcox en relación con la mente de algunos hombres: una luz concentrada en un punto diminuto, un breve espacio de Diez Minutos que se movía, autónomo, a través de los años. No era como el pagano que vive en el Presente y que

puede ser más sabio que todos los filósofos juntos. Míster Wilcox vivía para los cinco minutos que acababan de transcurrir y para los próximos cinco minutos; tenía una mentalidad comercial.

¿En qué posición se encontraba ahora, cuando su coche se alejaba de Oniton y ponía proa hacia las grandes colinas? Margaret había oído un rumor, pero no había motivo de inquietud: le había perdonado, que Dios la bendiga, y él se sentía más hombre por ello. Charles y Evie no se habían enterado de nada y nunca se enterarían. Ni tampoco Paul. Sintió una gran ternura por sus hijos, una ternura que no intentó relacionar con ninguna causa remota: mistres Wilcox quedaba demasiado atrás en su vida. No la relacionó con el súbito y doloroso cariño que sintió por Evie. ¡Pobre Evie, pobre pequeña! Confiaba en que Cahill sería un marido decente.

¿Y Margaret?, ¿en qué posición se encontraba?

Albergaba pequeños temores. Seguramente su hermana se había enterado de algo. Le asustaba el encuentro con ella en la ciudad. Y estaba inquieta por Leonard ante el cual, con toda certeza, eran responsables. Tampoco mistress Bast tenía que morirse de hambre. Pero el eje de la situación seguía inalterado. Aún amaba a Henry. Sus actos, que no su disposición, le habían defraudado, y eso podía resistirlo. Y amaba su futura casa. Erguida en el coche, el mismo coche del que había saltado dos días antes, volvió la vista con honda emoción hacia Oniton. Detrás de la Granja y de la torre almenada del castillo pudo distinguir la iglesia y los aleros blancos y negros del George. Ahí estaba el puente y el río que mordisqueaba su península verde. Podía incluso distinguir la caseta de baño, pero cuando buscó con la vista el trampolín nuevo de Charles, el promontorio de la colina se elevó y ocultó todo el paisaje.

Nunca lo volvió a ver. Día y noche el río sigue fluyendo en dirección a Inglaterra; un día tras otro el sol se oculta tras las montañas de Gales y la torre plañe: «Ved al héroe conquistador.» Pero los Wilcox no tienen cabida en este lugar, ni en ningún otro. No son sus nombres los que quedan inscritos en el registro de la parroquia. No son sus fantasmas los que suspiran entre los alisos al anochecer. Han entrado en el valle y han salido, dejando tras de sí un poco de polvo y un poco de dinero.

CAPÍTULO XXX

Tibby estaba por aquellas fechas empezando su último año en Oxford. Había abandonado el colegio y contemplaba el Universo —o la parte de Universo que le interesaba— desde su cómodo alojamiento en Long Wall. Pocas cosas le interesaban. Cuando un joven no está turbado por las pasiones y es sinceramente indiferente a la opinión de los demás, sus perspectivas son necesariamente limitadas. Tibby no deseaba fortalecer la posición de los ricos ni mejorar la de los pobres, y así, se contentaba con contemplar los olmos que se mecían tras los parapetos almenados de Magdalen. Hay vidas peores que la suya. Aunque egoísta, jamás era cruel; aunque de maneras afectadas, jamás adoptaba poses. Como Margaret, desdeñaba el heroísmo y sólo después de muchas visitas sus compañeros descubrían que Schlegel poseía carácter e inteligencia. Había hecho un buen papel en los exámenes, con gran sorpresa de los que asistían a clase y practicaban los deportes meticulosamente, y ahora se dedicaba con displicencia al estudio del chino por si un día consentía en graduarse como intérprete. En esta ocupación estaba cuando entró Helen. Un telegrama la había precedido.

Tibby advirtió de un modo distante que su hermana estaba alterada. Como norma, la encontraba excesivamente enfática y nunca hasta entonces había percibido en ella esta mirada suplicante, patética pero digna, esta apariencia de marino que lo ha perdido todo en el mar.

—Vengo de Oniton —empezó Helen—. Hubo un montón de problemas.

—Sugiero que comamos —dijo Tibby tomando el clarete que se calentaba en la chimenea. Helen se sentó a la mesa con aire sumiso —. ¿A qué viene esta salida precipitada?

—Salí al amanecer, o algo por el estilo... en cuanto pude irme.

—Ya lo supongo, pero ¿por qué?

—No sé qué hacer, Tibby. Estoy preocupada por ciertas novedades que conciernen a Meg y no quiero enfrentarme con ella, así que no vuelvo a Wickham Place. Me detuve aquí para hablar contigo.

La patrona entró con unas chuletas. Tibby puso un punto en su gramática china y las sirvió. Oxford, un Oxford en vacaciones, dormitaba y susurraba fuera; en el interior de la pieza los rescoldos de la chimenea se cubrían de una capa de gris allí donde les alcanzaban los rayos del sol. Helen continuó su extraña historia.

—Dile a Meg que la quiero mucho y que deseo estar sola. Tengo intención de irme a Múnich o a Bonn.

—Es un recado bien fácil de dar —dijo su hermano.

—Por lo que respecta a Wickham Place y a mi parte del mobiliario, podéis hacer lo que os parezca. Mi opinión es que tendría que venderse todo. ¿De qué nos sirven los polvorientos libros de economía que no han servido para mejorar el mundo, o el odioso costurero de mamá? Tengo otro encargo para ti. Quiero que envíes una carta —se levantó—. Todavía no la he escrito. Bien pensado, ¿por qué no puedo enviarla yo misma? —se volvió a sentar—. Me da vueltas la cabeza. Espero que no aparezca ninguno de tus amigos.

Tibby cerró la puerta con llave. Sus amigos la encontraban así a menudo. Luego le preguntó si algo había ido mal en la boda de Evie.

—No en la boda —dijo Helen y se puso a llorar.

Tibby la había visto histérica muchas veces; ésa era una de las facetas de su hermana que no le interesaban. Sin embargo, aquellas lágrimas le conmovieron como algo insólito. Se aproximaba a las cosas que sí le interesaban, como la música. Dejó el cuchillo y la miró con curiosidad. Luego, como ella no cesaba de sollozar, continuó despachando su comida.

Llegó el momento del segundo plato y aún lloraba Helen. A continuación venía una Carlota de manzana, que, como es sabido, se estropea si no se come en seguida.

—¿Te importa que entre mistress Martlett? —preguntó él—, ¿o prefieres que recoja el plato en la puerta?

—¿Me puedo lavar, Tibby?

La condujo a su dormitorio e hizo entrar el pastel en su ausencia. Una vez se hubo servido, puso el resto sobre la chimenea para mantenerlo caliente. Su mano se alargó hacia la Gramática China y empezó a hojear el libro distraídamente, alzando despectivo las cejas, quizá en señal de desprecio hacia la naturaleza humana, quizá hacia el chino. En esta ocupación lo encontró Helen cuando regresó. Se había calmado, pero la expresión de súplica no había desaparecido de sus ojos.

—Ahora vamos con la explicación —dijo—. ¿Por qué no empecé por ahí? Me he enterado de algo sobre míster Wilcox. Se ha comportado muy mal, la verdad, y ha arruinado la vida de dos personas. Todo esto lo comprendí de pronto la noche pasada. Estoy muy preocupada y no sé qué hacer. Mistress Bast...

—Oh, esa gente...

Aquello pareció silenciar a Helen.

—¿Cierro de nuevo la puerta?

—No, gracias, Tibbykins. Eres muy bueno conmigo. Quiero contarte toda la historia antes de irme al extranjero. Haz con ella lo que mejor te parezca, igual que si se tratase del mobiliario. Creo que Meg no se ha enterado de nada, pero no puedo enfrentarme a ella y decirle que el hombre con quien se va a casar se ha comportado mal. Ni siquiera sé si habría que decírselo. Sabiendo ella como sabe que no me quita ese hombre, sospecharía de mí, creería que quiero arruinar su matrimonio. Sencillamente, no sé qué hacer. Confío en tu buen criterio. ¿Qué harías?

—Presumo que míster Wilcox tuvo una querida —dijo Tibby.

Helen enrojeció de vergüenza y de rabia.

—Arruinó la vida de dos personas. Y va por ahí diciendo que los actos personales no cuentan y que siempre habrá ricos y pobres. La

conoció cuando estaba intentando hacerse rico en Chipre. No quiero dejarle en peor lugar del que se merece: ella sin lugar a dudas estaba dispuesta a enredarse con él. Pero así es como sucedió. Luego él siguió su camino y ella el suyo. ¿Cuál crees que es el final de estas mujeres?

Tibby admitió que era un mal asunto.

—Acaban en una de estas dos formas: o se hunden hasta que los asilos de lunáticos y de ancianos están llenos y hacen que míster Wilcox escriba cartas a los periódicos lamentando la degeneración nacional, o bien atrapan a un muchacho y se casan con él antes de que sea demasiado tarde. Ella... en fin, no puedo culparla.

—Pero eso no es todo —prosiguió tras una larga pausa durante la cual la patrona sirvió el café—. Voy ahora al asunto que nos llevó a Oniton. Fuimos los tres. Actuando de acuerdo con los consejos de míster Wilcox, el hombre había dejado una colocación segura y tomado otra insegura, de la que ha sido expulsado. Hay ciertas excusas, pero en lo esencial la culpa es de míster Wilcox, como la propia Meg reconoce. Es de estricta justicia que dé trabajo a este hombre, pero se encuentra con la mujer y, como un miserable que es, se niega e intenta deshacerse del marido. Hace que Meg le escriba. Aquella misma noche nos llegaron dos notas de Meg: una para mí y otra para Leonard rechazándole sin ninguna explicación. Yo no podía comprenderlo. Entonces resultó que mistress Bast había hablado con míster Wilcox en el jardín cuando la dejamos para ir a reservar habitaciones, y todavía estaba hablando con él cuando Leonard volvió a recogerla. Leonard lo sabía todo. A míster Wilcox le pareció natural arruinarle por segunda vez. ¡Natural! ¿Tú te habrías contenido?

—La verdad es que es un mal asunto —dijo Tibby.

Esta respuesta pareció apaciguar a su hermana.

—Temí ver las cosas con demasiado apasionamiento. Pero tú las ves desde fuera y lo sabes mejor. Dentro de uno o dos días, o una semana, quizá, da los pasos que juzgues oportunos. Lo dejo en tus manos.

Concluyó su encargo.

—En lo concerniente a Meg, ya conoces todos los hechos —añadió. Tibby suspiró; le parecía muy duro encontrarse, en base a su imparcialidad, emplazado como miembro del jurado. Nunca le habían interesado los seres humanos, actitud reprochable en verdad, pero lo cierto es que ya había tenido bastante humanismo en Wickham Place. Así como algunas personas dejan de atender cuando se habla de libros, la atención de Tibby se perdía cuando se trataba de discutir las «relaciones personales». ¿Debía saber Margaret que Helen sabía lo que los Bast sabían? Preguntas como ésta le habían mortificado desde la infancia y en Oxford había aprendido a decir que «la importancia de los seres humanos había sido ampliamente exagerada por los especialistas». Este epigrama, con su tufillo a siglo XIX, carecía, naturalmente, de significado, pero Tibby habría dejado correr el asunto de buena gana si su hermana no hubiese sido incesantemente bella.

—¿Sabes una cosa, Helen?... Toma un cigarrillo... No sé qué hacer.

—En tal caso, no hagas nada. Me atrevo a decir que estás en lo cierto. Dejémoslos que se casen. Queda la cuestión de la compensación.

—¿También me la quieres adjudicar? ¿No sería mejor que consultaras a un experto?

—Es un asunto confidencial —dijo Helen—. No tiene nada que ver con Meg y no se lo menciones bajo ningún pretexto. No sé quién va a pagar la compensación si no lo hago yo y ya he decidido la cuantía. Tan pronto como me sea posible voy a transferir esa suma a tu cuenta corriente y cuando esté en Alemania se la entregarás en mi nombre. Nunca olvidaré tu amabilidad, Tibbykins, si haces lo que te pido.

—¿Y cuál es esa suma?

—Cinco mil libras.

—¡Por Dios bendito! —dijo Tibby y se volvió rojo como la grana.

—¿De qué sirven los donativos? Quiero haber hecho algo en la vida: rescatar a una persona del abismo, y eso no se consigue con mezquinos regalos de unos pocos chelines y unas mantas. Quiero

hacer el gris menos gris. Supongo que la gente lo juzgará extraordinario.

—¡Me importa un comino lo que piense la gente! —exclamó Tibby, cuya excitación daba a su voz una virilidad desacostumbrada —. Pero es la mitad de lo que tienes...

—Ni siquiera la mitad —Helen extendió las manos sobre su falda manchada—. Tengo todavía demasiado y una vez, en Chelsea, determinamos, la primavera pasada, que son necesarias trescientas libras anuales para poner a un hombre en pie. Lo que yo les doy producirá ciento cincuenta a repartir entre dos. No es suficiente.

Tibby se recobraba con dificultad. No estaba enfadado ni sorprendido y sabía que Helen tenía aún suficiente para vivir, pero le asombraba ver la maraña que la gente puede hacer con sus vidas. Sus delicadas entonaciones no iban a servir de nada y sólo pudo añadir que las cinco mil libras le causarían un montón de problemas a él personalmente.

—No esperaba que me comprendieses.

—¿Yo? ¡Yo no comprendo a nadie!

—¿Pero lo harás?

—Al parecer...

—Así pues, te dejo dos encargos. El primero se refiere a míster Wilcox y lo dejo a tu discreción. El segundo se refiere al dinero, no debe mencionarse a nadie y ha de cumplirse al pie de la letra. Mañana le enviarás cien libras a cuenta.

Tibby la acompañó paseando a la estación, a través de las calles cuya apretada belleza nunca le había desconcertado ni fatigado. La adorable criatura que es Oxford elevaba cúpulas y agujas de torre en un azul sin nubes y sólo el ganglio de la vulgaridad en los alrededores de Carfax mostraba cuán evanescente es el fantasma, cómo naufraga su pretensión de representar a Inglaterra. Helen, repitiendo sus encargos, no se daba cuenta de nada: tenía a los Bast metidos en la cabeza y volvió a referir la crisis de un modo meditativo. Parecía estar comprobando si aún resultaba válida su versión de los hechos. Una vez él le preguntó por qué había metido a los Bast en mitad de la boda de Evie. Helen se detuvo como un animal atemorizado y dijo: «¿Tan extraño te parece?» Sus ojos, la

mano en la boca, le obsesionaron hasta que su recuerdo fue absorbido por la figura de Saint Mary the Virgin ante la cual se paró un momento en su camino de regreso a casa.

Conviene ahora seguirle en el cumplimiento de sus deberes. Al día siguiente le llamó Margaret. Estaba atemorizada por la huida de Helen y Tibby tuvo que decirle que le había ido a visitar a Oxford. Luego dijo Margaret:

—¿Parecía preocupada por algún rumor concerniente a Henry?

—Sí —contestó él.

—¡Sabía que era eso! —exclamó Margaret—. Le escribiré.

Tibby sintió un gran alivio.

Luego envió el cheque a la dirección que Helen le había dado e hizo saber al destinatario que había recibido instrucciones de enviarle con posterioridad cinco mil libras. Recibió una respuesta muy cortés y en tono sosegado: la respuesta que el propio Tibby habría dado. El cheque fue devuelto y la donación rechazada toda vez que el remitente no estaba necesitado de dinero. Tibby le remitió todo esto a Helen añadiendo con todo su corazón que Leonard Bast le parecía una gran persona, después de todo. La respuesta de Helen fue frenética: no tenía que hacer caso. Que fuera inmediatamente y le dijera que ella ordenaba que aceptase. Fue. Un rastro de libros y de adornos de porcelana le recibió. Los Bast acababan de ser desahuciados por no pagar sus rentas y se habían ido sin dejar señas. Helen, por entonces, había empezado a hacer tonterías con su dinero y se había vendido incluso sus acciones de los Ferrocarriles de Nottingham y Derby. Durante unas semanas no hizo nada. Luego reinvirtió y, debido a los buenos consejos de sus asesores, acabó más rica de lo que había sido antes.

CAPÍTULO XXXI

Las casas tienen su propia forma de morir, y caen de maneras tan varias como las generaciones de los hombres. Algunas mueren con un trágico estrépito; otras mueren tranquilamente y van a parar a otra vida en el más allá, en la ciudad de los fantasmas; a otras, por último, y así fue la muerte de Wickham Place, el espíritu las abandona antes de que el cuerpo perezca. Wickham Place había iniciado su decadencia en la primavera, desintegrando a las dos mujeres que la habitaban más de lo que ellas mismas suponían y obligándoles a abordar regiones desconocidas. En septiembre era ya un cadáver, vacío de emociones y apenas santificado por los recuerdos de treinta años de felicidad. A través del arco redondeado de su puerta pasó el mobiliario, pasaron los cuadros y los libros hasta que la última habitación fue despojada de sus entrañas y el último camión se alejó roncando. Durante dos semanas se quedó en pie, con los ojos abiertos, atónita de su propia vaciedad. Luego cayó. Entraron los peones y la redujeron a escombros. Con sus músculos y su buen carácter, con su olor a cerveza, los peones no fueron malos inquilinos para una casa que siempre había sido humana y que no había tomado erróneamente la cultura como un fin en sí misma.

El mobiliario, con escasas excepciones, se fue a Hertfordshire, pues míster Wilcox había ofrecido amablemente Howards End como almacén. Míster Bryce había fallecido en el extranjero —un asunto de lo más desagradable— y parecían existir pocas garantías de que el alquiler fuera pagado con regularidad, así que míster Wilcox canceló el contrato y recobró la posesión. Hasta tanto no volviera a arrendar la casa, los Schlegel estaban invitados a apilar su mobiliario en el garaje y en las habitaciones de la planta baja.

Margaret puso algunas objeciones, pero Tibby aceptó encantado, porque aquello le evitaba tomar una decisión sobre el futuro. La plata y los cuadros más valiosos encontraron un alojamiento más seguro en Londres, pero el grueso de las cosas se fue al campo y quedó encomendada su custodia a miss Avery.

Poco antes de la mudanza nuestro héroe y nuestra heroína se casaron. Habían capeado el temporal y podían esperar razonablemente la paz. ¿Qué mayor seguridad puede encontrar una mujer que el no tener ilusiones y sin embargo seguir amando? Margaret había descubierto el pasado de su marido, así como su corazón. Conocía igualmente su propio corazón con una profundidad que la gente vulgar habría considerado imposible. Sólo el corazón de mistress Wilcox permanecía escondido y quizá sea supersticioso especular con los sentimientos de los muertos. Se casaron de un modo tranquilo, realmente tranquilo, pues a medida que se acercaba el día, Margaret se negó a pasar por otro Oniton. Su hermano la acompañó a la iglesia y su tía, que estaba mal de salud, presidió un refresco incoloro. Los Wilcox estuvieron representados por Charles, que hizo de testigo del matrimonio, y por míster Cahill. Paul envió un telegrama. En pocos minutos y sin música el sacerdote los hizo marido y mujer y cayó sobre ellos la campana de cristal que separa a las parejas casadas del resto del mundo. Ella, monógama por naturaleza, lamentó el final de algunos inocentes aromas de la vida; él, cuyos instintos eran polígamos, se sintió moralmente atado por el cambio y menos susceptible de caer en las tentaciones que le habían asaltado en el pasado.

Pasaron su luna de miel cerca de Innsbruck. Henry conocía un hotel de toda confianza y Margaret esperaba encontrarse con su hermana. En esto se llevó una desilusión. Cuando ellos fueron hacia el Sur, Helen se retiró al otro lado del Brenner y escribió una postal bien poco satisfactoria desde las orillas del lago de Garda diciendo que sus planes eran inseguros y que sería mejor que la ignorasen. Evidentemente le disgustaba un encuentro con Henry. Dos meses son sin duda suficientes para acostumbrar a un extraño a una situación que una esposa ha aceptado en dos días, y Margaret tuvo que lamentar una vez más la falta de control de su hermana. En una larga carta puntuó la necesidad de ser caritativos en lo referente a los asuntos sexuales, tan poco es lo que sabemos de

ellos; es difícil juzgar para aquellos que se hallan involucrados personalmente y, si esto es así, ¿cómo no va a ser fútil el juicio de la sociedad? «No digo que no haya normas, porque esto implicaría la destrucción de la moral; sólo digo que no puede haber normas hasta que nuestros impulsos nos estén mejor clasificados y comprendidos.» Helen le dio las gracias por su amable carta: respuesta bien curiosa. Se fue aún más al Sur y habló de pasar el invierno en Nápoles.

Míster Wilcox no sintió que la cita fallara. La ausencia de Helen le dejaba tiempo para que cicatrizase la herida. Había momentos en que aún le dolía. Si en aquellos lejanos tiempos hubiera sabido que Margaret le esperaba —tan vivaz, tan inteligente y tan sumisa—, se habría mantenido más digno de ella. Incapaz de agrupar el pasado confundía el episodio de Jacky con otro episodio que había tenido lugar en sus años de bachillerato. Los dos episodios formaban una gavilla de hierbajos silvestres de la que se arrepentía de todo corazón, sin darse cuenta de que aquellas hierbas tenían un tronco más oscuro, el cual, a su vez, tenía las raíces en otro deshonor. La incontinencia y la infidelidad eran tan confusas para él como lo habían sido para la Edad Media, su única guía moral. Ruth —¡la pobre Ruth!— no entraba en sus cálculos en modo alguno, porque la pobre Ruth no se había enterado de nada.

Su afecto por su actual mujer fue en aumento. Su inteligencia no le causó problemas y, a decir verdad, le gustaba verla leyendo poesías o algo relativo al problema social: eso la distinguía de las esposas de otros hombres. Sólo tenía que llamarla y ella cerraba el libro de golpe y estaba presta a hacer lo que él deseara. A veces discutían alegremente, y en una o dos ocasiones ella le arrinconó a él, pero tan pronto él se puso realmente serio, ella cedió. El hombre está hecho para guerrear; la mujer, para solaz del guerrero, si bien a éste no le disgusta, de vez en cuando, un simulacro de lucha. Margaret no podía ganar una batalla, porque no tenía músculos, sino nervios. Los nervios le hacían saltar de un coche en marcha, o negarse a celebrar una boda en la forma adecuada. El guerrero bien puede permitirle que triunfe en tales ocasiones: no alteran la base imperecedera de las cosas que afectan a su paz.

Margaret sufrió un duro ataque a sus nervios durante la luna de miel. Henry le comunicó, de un modo desenfadado, ocasional, como

era su costumbre, que había dejado la granja de Oniton. Ella dio muestras de preocupación y le preguntó con cierta sequedad por qué no había sido consultada.

—No quise importunarte —contestó él—. Además, no tuve la confirmación definitiva hasta esta mañana.

—¿Y dónde vamos a vivir? —dijo Margaret intentando reírse—. A mí me gustaba muchísimo aquel lugar. ¿No crees que hay que tener un hogar permanente, Henry?

Henry le aseguró que le había malentendido. La vida hogareña es la que nos distingue de los extranjeros. Pero no soportaba las casas húmedas.

—Esto es nuevo. Hasta ahora no me había enterado de que Oniton era húmedo.

—Pero, querida —dijo él extendiendo las manos—, ¿no tienes ojos?, ¿no tienes piel? ¿Qué otra cosa podría ser sino húmeda en una situación semejante? En primer lugar, la granja es de arcilla y está edificada donde debería haber estado el foso del castillo. Luego está ese detestable riachuelo que fluye toda la noche como una cafetera. No tienes más que tocar las paredes de la bodega o mirar bajo los aleros del tejado. Pregúntale a sir James o a cualquiera. Los valles de Shropshire son famosos. El único lugar factible para situar una casa en Shropshire son las colinas; pero yo, por mi parte, creo que el lugar está demasiado lejos de Londres y que el paisaje no es nada del otro mundo.

Margaret no pudo resistir el preguntarle:

—Entonces, ¿por qué fuiste allá?

—Bueno... porque... —echó la cabeza hacia atrás y se enfadó—. ¿Y por qué hemos venido al Tirol, puestos a preguntar? Se podría preguntar así indefinidamente.

Se podría; pero sólo estaba ganando tiempo para encontrar una respuesta plausible. Al final la encontró y la fue creyendo a medida que hablaba.

—La verdad es que tomé la casa de Oniton por Evie. Así es como fue y no sigamos.

—Como quieras.

—No quiero que ella se entere de que me metió en un lío. Apenas firmé el contrato, se comprometió para casarse. ¡Pobrecilla! Le hacía tanta ilusión que no tuve tiempo siquiera de hacer averiguaciones sobre la casa. Temí que se llevara un gran disgusto, como os ocurre a todas las de vuestro sexo. Bueno, no ha pasado nada grave. Evie ha tenido su boda en el campo y nosotros nos hemos desembarazado de la casa en favor de unos individuos que están montando una escuela de primera enseñanza.

—¿Y dónde viviremos, Henry? A mí me gustaría vivir en algún sitio.

—Todavía no lo he decidido. ¿Qué tal Norfolk?

Margaret guardó silencio. El matrimonio no le había salvado del sentimiento de transición. Londres no era sino una premonición de la civilización nómada que está alterando la naturaleza humana y arrojando sobre las relaciones personales una tensión mayor aún de la que hasta el momento han soportado. El cosmopolitismo, si acaba por instaurarse, nos privará de la ayuda de la tierra. Los árboles, los prados y las montañas sólo serán un espectáculo y el poder de arraigo que antaño ejercieron sobre el carácter deberá confiarse exclusivamente al Amor. Pero, ¿podrá el Amor soportar esta carga?

—¿En qué mes estamos? —continuó Henry—. Casi en octubre. Pasemos el invierno en Ducie Street y busquemos algo en primavera.

—A ser posible, algo permanente. No debo de ser tan joven como antes, porque estas variaciones no me sientan bien.

—Pero, querida, ¿qué prefieres: variaciones o reumatismo?

—Ya comprendo tu punto de vista —dijo Margaret levantándose —. Si Oniton es realmente húmedo, no podemos ir; es mejor que la habiten los niños. Sólo te pido que en primavera nos enteremos bien antes de tomar una decisión. Aprenderé de Evie y no te meteré prisa. Recuerda que esta vez tienes absoluta libertad. Estos cambios incesantes han de ser malos para el mobiliario y son ciertamente costosos.

—¡Qué mujercita tan práctica! ¿Qué has estado leyendo? Teo... teo... ¿qué?

—Teosofía.

Así fue como Ducie Street se convirtió en su primer destino: un destino bastante agradable. La casa, un poco mayor que Wickham Place, sirvió a Margaret de entrenamiento para el inmenso alojamiento prometido para la primavera. Con frecuencia estaban fuera, pero en la casa, la vida discurría con regularidad. Por la mañana Henry se iba a trabajar y su bocadillo (reliquia de algún deseo primitivo) lo preparaba siempre personalmente su mujer. A él no le gustaba el bocadillo para comer, pero quería tenerlo consigo por si le entraba el hambre a eso de las once. Cuando Henry se había marchado había que ocuparse de la casa, humanizar a la servidumbre y algunos asuntos de Helen que resolver. Le remordía un poco la conciencia por los Bast; no sentía haberlos perdido de vista. Sin duda valía la pena ayudar a Leonard, pero, como esposa de Henry, Margaret prefería ayudar a algún otro. En cuanto al teatro y a los clubs de debates, cada vez le atraían menos. Empezó a quedarse al margen de los nuevos movimientos y a perder el tiempo libre en releer o pensar en vez de dedicarse a lo que tanto preocupaba a sus amigos de Chelsea. Estos atribuyeron el cambio a su matrimonio y tal vez un profundo instinto le prevenía de no alejarse de su marido más de lo estrictamente inevitable. Con todo, la causa principal era todavía más honda: había dejado atrás los estímulos y estaba pasando de las palabras a las cosas. Sin duda era una pena perder el contacto con Wedekind o con John, pero la clausura de algunas puertas es inevitable después de los treinta si se quiere que la mente se convierta en un poder creativo.

CAPÍTULO XXXII

Margaret estaba estudiando los planos un día de la primavera siguiente —pues había acabado decidiéndose por ir a vivir a Sussex y edificar una casa— cuando le anunciaron la visita de la mujer de Charles Wilcox.

—¿Te has enterado de la noticia? —gritó Dolly apenas hubo entrado en la habitación—. Charles está fur... Quiero decir que está seguro de que tú estás al corriente o, mejor dicho, de que no te has enterado de nada.

—¡Vaya, Dolly! —dijo Margaret besándola plácidamente—. ¡Qué sorpresa! ¿Cómo están los niños?

Los niños estaban muy bien y describiendo el enorme conflicto que había tenido lugar en el Club de Tenis de Hilton, Dolly olvidó las noticias. Gente inconveniente había intentado ingresar. El rector, como representante de los antiguos habitantes, había dicho que... Charles había dicho que... El recaudador de contribuciones había dicho que... Charles sentía no haber dicho que... Y acabó su relato con:

—¡Qué suerte tienes de tener cuatro pistas para ti en Midhurst!

—Sí, será muy bonito.

—¿Son éstos los planos? ¿Te importa que los vea?

—Por supuesto que no.

—Charles aún no ha visto los planos.

—Acaban de llegar. Esto es la planta baja... no, es un poco difícil. Mira esta perspectiva. Tendremos una fachada muy bonita y una vista pintoresca.

—¿Qué es lo que huele de esta manera tan rara? —dijo Dolly tras una breve inspección. Era incapaz de entender planos y mapas.

—Supongo que es el papel.

—¿Y qué quiere decir «parte superior»?

—Pues... una parte superior como otra cualquiera. Ésta es la vista y la parte que huele más es el cielo.

—Vaya, pasemos a otra cosa. Margaret, esto... ¿qué te iba yo a decir? Ah, sí, ¿cómo está Helen?

—Bien.

—¿No piensa volver a Inglaterra? Todo el mundo dice que es muy raro que no venga.

—Sí que es raro —dijo Margaret intentando ocultar su preocupación. Estaba muy amargada por este asunto—. Helen es muy rara, terriblemente rara. Hace ya ocho meses que se fue.

—¿Y no tiene una dirección fija?

—La *poste restante* de un lugar de Baviera es su dirección. Escríbele unas letras. Yo se las haré llegar.

—No, no te molestes. ¿Estás segura de que hace ocho meses que se fue?

—Exactamente. Se fue justo después de la boda de Evie. Hará ocho meses.

—O sea, cuando nació el niño.

—Eso es.

Dolly suspiró y recorrió el salón con ojos de envidia. Empezaba a perder su brillantez y su belleza. A la familia de Charles no le iban bien las cosas, porque míster Wilcox había educado a sus hijos para que tuvieran gustos caros y era partidario de dejarles que se espabilaran por sí mismos. Al fin y a la postre no les había tratado con generosidad. Por otra parte, esperaban otro niño, según le dijo Dolly a Margaret e iban a tener que prescindir del coche. Margaret mostró su condolencia de un modo formal y Dolly no pudo imaginarse que la madrastra de su marido estaba incitando al suyo para que diera a sus hijos una asignación más liberal. Dolly volvió a suspirar y por fin recordó la ofensa inicial.

—Ah, sí —gritó—, esto es: miss Avery está desembalando tus pertenencias.

—¿Y eso por qué? ¡Qué cosa más inútil!

—A mí no me lo preguntes. Supongo que tú le ordenaste hacerlo.

—Yo no hice tal cosa. A lo mejor quiere airear los muebles. De vez en cuando le da por entrar en acción.

—Es algo más que airear —dijo Dolly solemnemente—. El suelo está cubierto de libros. Charles me envió a ver qué había hecho, porque está seguro de que tú no sabías nada.

—¡Libros! —exclamó Margaret conmovida por la sagrada palabra —. Dolly, ¿lo dices en serio? ¿Ha estado tocando nuestros libros?

—¡Ya lo creo! El vestíbulo estaba lleno de libros. Charles estaba seguro de que tú lo sabías.

—Te agradezco mucho la información, Dolly. ¿Qué le habrá pasado a miss Avery? Tengo que ir a verlo en seguida. Algunos libros son de mi hermano y muy valiosos. No tiene derecho a abrir las cajas.

—Yo creo que está majareta. Es la que no se casó, ¿sabes? A lo mejor se figura que son regalos de boda para ella. A las solteronas les da por ahí a veces. Miss Avery nos odia a todos nosotros desde la trifulca con Evie.

—No me había enterado de nada —dijo Margaret. Una visita de Dolly siempre tenía su compensación.

—¿No sabías que le había hecho un regalo a Evie el agosto pasado y que Evie se lo devolvió? ¡Madre mía! No te puedes imaginar la carta que le escribió miss Avery.

—Evie no hizo bien en devolvérselo. Es impropio de ella hacer cosas tan crueles.

—Pero el regalo era muy caro.

—¿Y qué, Dolly? Eso no supone ninguna diferencia.

—A pesar de todo, cuando cuesta unas once libras... Yo no lo vi, pero era un precioso broche de esmalte de una tienda de Bond

Street. No se pueden aceptar estos regalos de una mujer del campo. ¿No te parece?

—Tú aceptaste un regalo de miss Avery cuando te casaste.

—Bah, el mío era una chuchería de barro que no valía medio penique. Lo de Evie fue distinto. Habrían tenido que invitar a la boda a una persona que había regalado un broche como aquél. El tío Percy, Albert, papá y Charles dijeron que no era posible y cuando cuatro hombres están de acuerdo en una cosa, ¿qué puede hacer una chica? Evie no quería molestar a la pobre vieja, así que le envió una carta chistosa creyendo que sería lo mejor y devolvió el broche directamente a la tienda para evitarle un problema a miss Avery.

—Y miss Avery contestó...

Los ojos de Dolly se agrandaron.

—Una carta espantosa. Charles dijo que era la carta de un loco. Al final recuperó el broche de la tienda y lo arrojó al estanque de los patos.

—¿Dio alguna razón?

—Nosotros creemos que quería ser invitada a Oniton y escalar un puesto en la sociedad.

—Es demasiado vieja para eso —dijo Margaret pensativa—. ¿No será que le envió ese regalo a Evie en recuerdo de su madre?

—Vaya, ésa es una idea. Dar a cada uno lo suyo, ¿eh? Bueno, creo que debería estar paseando. Vamos míster Trasto, quieres un abrigo nuevo y no sé quién te lo va a comprar —dijo dirigiéndose a su vestimenta con triste humor, y salió del aposento.

Margaret la siguió para preguntarle si Henry estaba enterado de la grosería de miss Avery.

—Sí, claro.

—Me extraña, en este caso, que me dejase pedirle que cuidara la casa.

—Bueno, sólo es una mujer del campo —dijo Dolly, y su explicación resultó correcta. Henry sólo censuraba a las clases inferiores cuando le convenía. Soportaba a miss Avery como a Crane: porque podía sacar partido de ambos. «Tengo paciencia con un hombre que sabe hacer su trabajo», solía decir, cuando, en

realidad, tenía paciencia con el trabajo, no con el hombre. Aunque pueda parecer paradójico, había algo artístico en todo ello: estaba dispuesto a pasar por alto un insulto a su hija antes que perder una buena criada para su mujer.

Margaret consideró que sería mejor solucionar a su modo aquel pequeño problema. Las partes en litigio estaban demasiado agitadas. Con permiso de Henry escribió una amable carta a miss Avery pidiéndole que dejara intactas las cajas. Luego, a la primera oportunidad que se presentó, fue a Howards End con la intención de embalar sus pertenencias y colocarlas en un almacén local, a la vista de que el plan primitivo había resultado un fracaso. Tibby prometió acompañarla, pero se excusó en el último momento. Y así, por segunda vez en su vida, Margaret entró sola en la casa.

CAPÍTULO XXXIII

El día elegido para la visita era exquisito y fue el último día de felicidad para Margaret en muchos meses. Su preocupación por la ausencia de Helen estaba todavía aletargada y la posible pelea con miss Avery constituía más bien un aliciente de la expedición. Por otra parte, había eludido la invitación de Dolly a comer en su casa. Al salir de la estación, cruzó el césped de la villa y entró en la larga avenida de castaños que conducía a la iglesia. La iglesia había estado en la villa en cierta ocasión, pero atraía a tantos fieles que el diablo, en uno de sus arrebatos, la había arrancado de sus cimientos y la había posado en una loma impracticable, a tres cuartos de milla de su primitivo emplazamiento. De ser cierta esta historia, la avenida de castaños debía de haber sido plantada por los ángeles. No podía imaginarse un camino más tentador para el cristiano tibio. Y si éste aún encontraba el camino muy largo, el diablo también había sido derrotado, porque la Ciencia había erigido la Holy Trinity, una capilla próxima a la casa de Charles, y la había cubierto con un techo de estaño.

Margaret anduvo por la avenida lentamente, deteniéndose a contemplar el cielo cuyos destellos se filtraban a través de las ramas más altas de los castaños, o a tocar las pequeñas herraduras que colgaban de las ramas más bajas. ¿Por qué no tiene Inglaterra una gran mitología? Nuestro folklore no sobrepasa los límites de la delicadeza y las grandes melodías de nuestro país han salido de las gaitas griegas. Por muy profunda y verdadera que pueda ser la imaginación de los nativos, en este punto parece haber flaqueado. Se ha detenido en las brujas y las hadas. No puede vivificar una fracción del campo en verano o dar nombres a media docena de estrellas. Inglaterra aún aguarda el supremo momento de su

literatura, al gran poeta que le dará voz, o mejor aún, a los mil pequeños poetas cuyas voces pasarán a nuestro lenguaje cotidiano.

En la iglesia, el panorama cambió. La avenida de castaños se convirtió en una carretera suave pero estrecha que conducía al campo abierto. La siguió durante una milla. Las vacilaciones del camino complacieron a Margaret. Como si no tuviera un destino urgente, el camino descendía una colina o la subía, según sus deseos, sin preocuparse de los desniveles ni del paisaje que, sin embargo, se expandía en todas direcciones. Las grandes propiedades que sofocan el sur de Hertfordshire eran allí menos obstrusivas y la apariencia de la tierra no era aristocrática ni urbana. Era difícil definirla, pero Margaret sabía lo que no era: presuntuosa. Aunque débil en sus contornos, poseía un toque de libertad que Surrey nunca tendría, y el arco distante de los Chilterns se alzaba en el horizonte como una montaña. «Dejado a su libre albedrío —era la opinión de Margaret—, este condado votaría a los liberales.» La tierra y la pequeña granja de ladrillo a la que llamó pidiendo las llaves eran otras tantas promesas de camaradería desapasionada: el más alto don que posee nuestra patria.

Pero el interior de la granja era decepcionante. Una joven prematuramente avejentada la recibió. «Sí, mistress Wilcox; no, mistress Wilcox; naturalmente, mistress Wilcox, mi tía recibió su carta. Mi tía ha ido a su casa de usted en este mismo momento. ¿Quiere que mande a un criado para indicarle el camino?» Seguido de: «Por supuesto, mi tía no cuida su casa por sistema; sólo lo hace para hacer un favor a un vecino, algo excepcional. Le da algo que hacer. Se pasa allí un montón de tiempo. Mi marido me dice a veces: "¿Dónde está tu tía?" y yo le digo: "No hace falta que lo preguntes, está en Howards End." Sí, mistress Wilcox. Mistress Wilcox, ¿puedo rogarle que acepte un trozo de pastel? ¿De verdad no quiere que le corte un trozo?» Margaret rehusó el pastel, pero, por desgracia, su negativa la hizo más importante a los ojos de la sobrina de miss Avery.

—No puedo permitir que vaya sola. No, de ninguna manera. De veras que no debe ir. Yo la conduciré, si es preciso. Tengo que coger el sombrero. Un momento —roncamente—, mistress Wilcox, no se mueva: voy a buscarlo.

Confusa, Margaret no se movió del vestíbulo, que había recibido ya la influencia del *art nouveau.* Las otras habitaciones parecían indemnes, si bien acusaban esa tristeza peculiar de los interiores rurales. Allí había vivido la antigua raza, cuyo recuerdo nos llena de inquietud. El campo que visitamos los fines de semana, antaño fue su verdadero hogar; los acontecimientos más serios de la vida —la muerte, la separación, el lamento de amor— tuvieron su más monda expresión en el corazón de los campos. No todo era tristeza, sin embargo. El sol brillaba alegremente, el tordo cantaba sus dos sílabas en los rosales en flor, unos niños jugaban ruidosos entre los montones de paja dorada. La mera presencia de la tristeza sorprendió a Margaret y acabó por darle un sentimiento de plenitud. Si ello fuera posible en alguna parte, en esas granjas inglesas podría verse la vida en su totalidad, reunir en una sola imagen su transitoriedad y su eterna juventud, conectar, conectar sin amargura hasta hermanar a todos los hombres. El regreso de la sobrina de miss Avery interrumpió los pensamientos de Margaret, pero esos pensamientos habían sido tan sedantes que aceptó alegremente la interrupción.

Era más rápido salir por la puerta trasera, y eso hicieron tras las debidas explicaciones. Innumerables pollos se pusieron a mortificar a la sobrina arremolinándose a sus pies en busca de comida, y lo mismo hizo una cerda desvergonzada y maternal. Margaret no sabía lo que buscaban aquellos animales. Pero su gentileza se desvaneció al contacto con el aire suave. El viento se estaba levantando, esparciendo la paja y revolviendo las colas de los patos que flotaban agrupados en familias sobre el broche de Evie. Una brisa deliciosa, primaveral, que hacía susurrar las hojas tiernas, barrió el campo y luego se extinguió. «Georgie», cantaba el tordo. «Cu-cú», llegó furtivamente de un macizo de pinos. «Georgie, lindo Georgie.» Y los demás pájaros se unieron a él en absurdo concierto. El seto parecía un cuadro a medio pintar que quedaría acabado en pocos días. Las celidonias crecían en sus bordes; los aros y las primaveras, al abrigo de sus huecos; las rosas silvestres, que aún conservaban sus escaramujos marchitos, mostraban al mismo tiempo una promesa de florecimiento. La primavera había llegado, desprovista de atuendos clásicos, y sin embargo, más hermosa que todas las primaveras; más hermosa aún que la que campea por entre los

mirtos de la Toscana, precedida de las gracias y seguida por los céfiros.

Las dos mujeres caminaron por un sendero derrochando cortesía. Pero Margaret iba pensando en lo difícil que le resultaba ponerse seria en el asunto del mobiliario en un día como aquél, y la sobrina iba soñando sombreros. Así enzarzadas llegaron a Howards End. Unos gritos estentóreos de «¡Tía! ¡Tía!» rasgaron el aire. No hubo respuesta. La puerta principal estaba cerrada.

—¿Estás segura de que miss Avery está aquí? —preguntó Margaret.

—Sí, mistress Wilcox, completamente segura. Está aquí todos los días.

Margaret trató de mirar a través de la ventana del comedor, pero alguien había echado una cortina por dentro. El aspecto de aquellas cortinas le resultó familiar, aunque no las recordaba de su visita anterior: en aquella ocasión le había parecido que míster Bryce se lo había llevado todo. Probaron la puerta de atrás. Tampoco recibieron respuesta ni pudieron ver nada. La ventana de la cocina estaba cubierta por una contraventana. Las de la despensa y el lavadero estaban obstruidas por trozos de madera que guardaban una amenazadora semejanza con las tapaderas de las cajas de embalaje. Margaret pensó en sus libros y también alzó la voz. Al primer gritó tuvo éxito.

—¡Está bien!, ¡está bien! —contestó alguien en el interior de la casa—. ¡Por fin ha llegado mistress Wilcox!

—¿Tienes la llave, tía?

—Vete, Madge —dijo miss Avery, todavía invisible.

—Tía, es mistress Wilcox.

Margaret apoyó a la sobrina.

—Su sobrina y yo hemos venido juntas...

—Madge, vete. No es momento para sombreros.

La pobre mujer se puso colorada.

—Mi tía se vuelve cada día más excéntrica —dijo nerviosamente.

—¡Miss Avery! —gritó Margaret—. He venido por lo de nuestros muebles. ¿Sería tan amable de dejarme entrar?

—Sí, mistress Wilcox —dijo la voz—, no faltaría más.

Pero a esas palabras sólo siguió el silencio. Llamaron de nuevo sin respuesta y caminaron en torno a la casa con desconsuelo.

—Espero que miss Avery no estará enferma —apuntó Margaret.

—Bueno, si me disculpa —dijo Madge—, quizá sería mejor que yo me fuera. Hay que vigilar al personal de la granja. Mi tía es un poco rara a veces.

Y se retiró derrotada llevándose consigo sus elegancias. Como si su partida hubiera liberado un resorte, la puerta principal de la casa se abrió de inmediato.

—Bueno, pase usted, mistress Wilcox —dijo miss Avery con amabilidad y calma.

—Muchas gracias —empezó a decir Margaret, pero se quedó cortada a la vista de un paragüero: el suyo.

—Entre en el vestíbulo, ante todo —dijo miss Avery. Corrió la cortina y Margaret profirió un grito de desesperación. Porque algo había sucedido. Las paredes estaban cubiertas con el contenido de la biblioteca de Wickham Place. La alfombra había sido tendida, la pesada mesa de trabajo colocada junto a la ventana; los estantes de la librería llenaban la pared de enfrente y la espada de su padre —y eso fue lo que más le desconcertó— había sido desenvainada y colgaba desnuda entre los sobrios volúmenes. Sin duda miss Avery había trabajado durante varios días.

—Me temo que no es esto lo que convinimos —empezó a decir —. Míster Wilcox y yo no queríamos que se tocasen las cajas. Estos libros, por ejemplo, son de mi hermano. Los guardamos para él y para mi hermana, que está en el extranjero. Cuando usted se comprometió amablemente a cuidar las cosas, no esperábamos que hiciera tanto.

—La casa ha estado vacía durante mucho tiempo —dijo la anciana.

Margaret no quiso discutir.

—Creo que no nos explicamos bien —dijo con cortesía—. Ha sido un error y, con toda seguridad, un error por nuestra parte.

—Mistress Wilcox, aquí se ha venido cometiendo un error tras otro durante cincuenta años. La casa es la casa de mistress Wilcox y ella no querría que continuase vacía por más tiempo.

Para ayudar a aquella pobre mente en decadencia, Margaret dijo:

—Sí, la casa de mistress Wilcox, la madre de Charles.

—Un error tras otro —dijo miss Avery—, un error tras otro.

—Bueno, no sé —dijo Margaret sentándose en uno de sus sillones—. No sé qué hacer —no pudo evitar echarse a reír.

—Sí, debería ser una casa feliz —dijo la otra.

—No sé... supongo. Bueno, muchas gracias, miss Avery. Está muy bien. Precioso.

—Todavía tiene que ver el salón —cruzó la puerta y descorrió una cortina. La luz entró a raudales en el salón e inundó el mobiliario del salón de Wickham Place—. Y el comedor —descorrió más cortinas, abrió más ventanas a la primavera—. Y luego, por aquí... —miss Avery continuó paseando arriba y abajo de la casa. Margaret perdió su voz, pero la oyó abrir las contraventanas de la cocina—. Aún no he terminado —anunció la anciana al volver—. Todavía queda mucho que hacer. Los chicos de la granja le subirán el armario al piso de arriba, porque no hay ninguna necesidad de meterse en gastos en Hilton.

—Todo esto es un error —repitió Margaret sintiendo que tenía que hacer valer su autoridad—. Un malentendido. Míster Wilcox y yo no vamos a vivir en Howards End.

—Ah, claro, ¿por culpa de la fiebre del heno?

—Hemos decidido construir una casa nueva en Sussex, y parte de este mobiliario, mi parte, irá a parar allá —miró a miss Avery con intensidad, intentando entender las revueltas de su cerebro. No había trazas de inconexión en la vieja. Sus arrugas eran vivaces y llenas de humor. Parecía provista de ingenio agudo y de nobleza sin ostentación.

—Usted cree que no volverá a vivir aquí, mistress Wilcox, pero volverá.

—Esto está por ver —dijo Margaret sonriendo—. Por el momento, no tenemos la menor intención de hacer lo que usted dice. Resulta que necesitamos una casa mucho mayor. Las circunstancias nos obligan a dar grandes recepciones. Por supuesto, algún día... Nunca se sabe, ¿no es cierto?

—¡Algún día! —replicó miss Avery—, bah, bah, no hable de «algún día». Usted ya está viviendo aquí ahora.

—¿De veras?

—Usted está viviendo aquí y ha estado viviendo los últimos diez minutos.

Era una idea absurda, pero con un extraño sentido de la deslealtad Margaret se levantó de su butaca. Sentía que Henry acababa de ser oscuramente censurado. Fueron al comedor, donde el sol bañaba el costurero de su madre, y luego al piso de arriba, donde innumerables dioses antiguos las contemplaron desde un nuevo nicho. El mobiliario encajaba admirablemente bien. En la habitación del centro, sobre el vestíbulo, en la habitación donde Helen había dormido cuatro años antes, miss Avery había colocado la vieja cunita de Tibby.

—El cuarto de los niños —dijo.

Margaret se volvió sin decir nada.

Al final lo recorrieron todo. La cocina y el pasillo estaban aún llenos de muebles y pajas, pero, de todo cuanto pudo ver, nada se había roto o estropeado. ¡Un despliegue patético de ingenuidad! A continuación dieron un paseo amistoso por el jardín, que se había vuelto salvaje desde la última visita. El sendero de grava estaba lleno de hierbas y el césped se extendía hasta las mismísimas barbas del garaje. Quizá Evie era la responsable de la extraña conducta de miss Avery. Pero Margaret sospechaba que la causa era más profunda y que la estúpida carta de la muchacha no había hecho otra cosa que liberar una irritación sofocada durante muchos años.

—Es un hermoso prado —hizo notar. Era una especie de salón abierto, delimitado cientos de años atrás por retazos diminutos de

los campos adyacentes. Los límites descendían en zig-zag de la colina en ángulos rectos y al fondo formaban un pequeño anexo verde, una suerte de tocador para vacas.

—Sí, el prado está muy bien —dijo miss Avery—, para los que no padecen de estornudos, claro está —y cloqueó maliciosamente—. He visto a Charles Wilcox salir con mis chicos en época de heno y enseñarles a comportarse como criados: tenían que hacer esto, no tenían que hacer aquello. Entonces le entraba el cosquilleo. Lo ha heredado de su padre, junto con otras cosas. No hay un solo Wilcox que soporte un campo en el mes de junio. Yo me moría de risa cuando cortejaba a Ruth.

—Mi hermano también padece de fiebre del heno —dijo Margaret.

—Esta casa es demasiado campo para ellos. Naturalmente, al principio estuvieron encantados de meterse aquí. Pero mejor es tener a los Wilcox que no tener nada, como ha podido comprobar usted misma.

Margaret se echó a reír.

—Han conservado esto en pie, ¿no es así? Sí, eso es.

—En mi opinión, mantienen Inglaterra en pie.

Pero miss Avery la dejó preocupada al responder:

—Ay, y se reproducen como conejos. Bien, bien, es un mundo muy curioso. Pero Él que lo hizo ya sabe lo que quiere, supongo yo. Si la mujer de Charles está esperando el cuarto, no tenemos por qué llevarle la contraria.

—Se reproducen y trabajan también —dijo Margaret consciente de una cierta invitación a la deslealtad, a la que hacían eco la brisa y el canto de los pájaros—. Desde luego, es un mundo curioso, pero en tanto lo gobiernen hombres como mi marido y sus hijos, no creo que sea nunca un mundo malo; al menos, no malo del todo.

—No, siempre será mejor que nada —dijo miss Avery volviéndose hacia el olmo.

De regreso a la granja, miss Avery habló de su vieja amiga más claro que antes. En la casa, Margaret se había preguntado si la

anciana distinguía entre la primera esposa y la segunda. En aquella ocasión, dijo:

—No vi mucho a Ruth desde que murió su abuela, pero nos seguíamos tratando con cortesía. Era una familia muy cortés. La vieja mistress Howards nunca habló mal de nadie ni dejó marchar a nadie sin darle de comer. Nunca puso en sus tierras: «Los que traspasen este límite serán denunciados», sino: «¿Tienen la amabilidad de no entrar?» Mistress Howards no nació para llevar una granja.

—¿No había ningún hombre que las ayudase? —preguntó Margaret.

—La cosa se aguantó hasta que no quedó ni un hombre —contestó miss Avery.

—Hasta que llegó míster Wilcox —corrigió Margaret, ansiosa de que su marido recibiese lo que merecía.

—Eso supongo; pero Ruth debería haberse casado con un... No vea en esto una falta de respeto hacia usted, porque yo creo que usted se habría casado con Wilcox aunque ella no se hubiera casado primero con él.

—¿Con quién debería haberse casado?

—¡Con un soldado! —exclamó la anciana—. Un soldado de verdad.

Margaret guardó silencio. Era una crítica al carácter de Henry mucho más mordaz que ninguna de las suyas. Se sintió a disgusto.

—Pero ya todo pasó —continuó la anciana—. Se acercan tiempos mejores, aunque he tenido que esperar mucho. Una noche, dentro de un par de semanas, volveré a ver las luces brillando a través del seto. ¿Ha encargado ya el carbón?

—No vamos a venir —dijo Margaret en tono firme. Respetaba demasiado a miss Avery para tomársela a broma—. No, no vendremos. Nunca vendremos. Todo esto ha sido un error. Hay que volver a embalar el mobiliario en seguida; lo siento, pero estamos haciendo otros arreglos y debo pedirle que me entregue las llaves.

—No faltaría más, mistress Wilcox —dijo miss Avery, y presentó su dimisión con una sonrisa.

Aliviada por esta conclusión y tras enviar sus saludos a Madge, Margaret volvió caminando a la estación. Tenía la intención de ir al almacén de muebles y dar las órdenes pertinentes para el traslado, pero la confusión le había resultado mayor de lo que esperaba y decidió consultar con Henry. Hizo bien. Henry era contrario a emplear al almacenista local que previamente había recomendado y aconsejó a Margaret que guardase sus enseres en Londres.

Pero antes de que esto pudiera llevarse a cabo, un problema inesperado se abatió sobre ella.

CAPÍTULO XXXIV

No era del todo inesperado. La salud de la tía Juley había sido mala todo el invierno. Sufrió una serie de resfriados y de congestiones y estaba demasiado ocupada para desembarazarse de ellos. Apenas acababa de prometer a su sobrina «arreglar su cansado pecho», cuando agarró un enfriamiento que se convirtió en una neumonía aguda. Margaret y Tibby se fueron a Swanage. Telegrafiaron a Helen y aquella reunión primaveral que tuvo lugar, después de todo, en la hospitalaria casa, estuvo presidida por la ternura de los bellos recuerdos. Un perfecto día en que el cielo parecía de porcelana azul y las olas de la discreta bahía batían la arena con la dulzura de un tambor, Margaret se apresuraba a través de los rododendros, enfrentada una vez más con la absurdidad de la Muerte. Una muerte puede tener su propia explicación, pero no arroja ninguna explicación sobre otra: hay que empezar de nuevo una investigación a ciegas. Los predicadores y los científicos pueden generalizar, pero nosotros sabemos que no hay generalización posible para los que amamos; no les espera ningún cielo, ni siquiera el olvido. La tía Juley, incapaz de tragedia, abandonaba la vida con risitas y disculpas por haberse detenido en ella tanto tiempo. Estaba muy débil; no podía ponerse a la altura de la situación, ni comprender el gran misterio que en opinión de todos la aguardaba; sólo le parecía que estaba acabada, más acabada de lo que había estado antes; que a cada momento veía, oía y sentía menos; y que, a menos que algo cambiase, pronto ya no sentiría nada. Las fuerzas que le quedaban las dedicaba a hacer planes: ¿No iba Margaret a hacer una excursión en barco?, ¿se había guisado la caballa como le gustaba a Tibby? Se preocupaba por la ausencia de Helen y también de ser la causa del regreso de Helen. Las enfermeras parecían

considerar aquellas preocupaciones como algo muy natural y tal vez eran una común aproximación a la Gran Puerta. Pero Margaret veía la Muerte desnuda de cualquier falso romanticismo. Sea cual sea el contenido de la Muerte, el proceso puede ser trivial y odioso.

—Es importante, Margaret, querida, que hagas la excursión de Lulworth cuando venga Helen.

—Helen no podrá quedarse, tía Juley. Ha telegrafiado diciendo que sólo puede venir a verte. Tiene que regresar a Alemania tan pronto estés bien.

—¡Qué rara es Helen! Míster Wilcox...

—¿Sí, querida?

—¿Puede pasarse sin ti?

Henry insistió en que Margaret acudiese junto a su tía y se mostró muy amable. Margaret se lo dijo una vez más.

Mistress Munt no se murió. Al margen de su voluntad, un poder más digno la tomó y la retuvo en el último peldaño del descenso. Regresó sin emoción, tan ridícula como siempre. Al cuarto día ya estaba fuera de peligro.

—Margaret, es importante —continuaba diciendo—: quiero que busques alguna compañía para dar paseos. Llama a miss Conder.

—Ya di un paseíto con miss Conder.

—No es una persona muy interesante. ¡Si al menos tuvieras a Helen!

—Ya tengo a Tibby, tía Juley.

—No, Tibby tiene que estudiar chino. Lo que necesitas es una buena compañía. Realmente, Helen es rara.

—Sí, rara ya es, la verdad —convino Margaret.

—No le basta con irse fuera, ¿por qué quiere ahora volverse a marchar en seguida?

—Seguramente cambiará de opinión cuando nos vea. No tiene el más mínimo equilibrio.

Era el reproche habitual, el de siempre, pero la voz de Margaret tembló al proferirlo. Por aquellas fechas estaba profundamente apenada por el comportamiento de su hermana. Podía tacharse de

desequilibrado el hecho de salir corriendo de Inglaterra, pero el quedarse ocho meses fuera hacía pensar que el corazón de Helen andaba tan mal como su cabeza. Cierto que acudiría junto al lecho de la enferma, pero ¿por qué prestaba oídos sordos a otra llamada más humana? Sí, Helen volvería, echaría una ojeada a su tía y se retiraría de nuevo a su vida nebulosa, oculta tras una lista de correos. Apenas existía; sus cartas se habían ido volviendo insulsas y esporádicas, no tenía necesidades ni curiosidad. ¡Y todo aquello se cargaba a la cuenta del pobre Henry! Henry, a quien su mujer había perdonado hacía mucho, aún era demasiado infame para merecer un saludo de su cuñada. Una reacción morbosa, en efecto, y Margaret descubrió con alarma que podía rastrear el origen de aquella morbosidad, una morbosidad que provenía de algo que sucedió cuatro años antes. La huida de Oniton, la desequilibrada protección de los Bast, la explosión de rabia en los Downs: todo estaba relacionado con Paul, un muchacho insignificante cuyos labios habían besado los de Helen durante una fracción de segundo. Margaret y mistress Wilcox habían temido que pudieran volver a besarse. Tonterías: el verdadero peligro estaba en la reacción. Reacción contra los Wilcox que había ido royendo su vida hasta convertir a Helen en una persona a la que apenas se podía calificar de sana. A los veinticinco años Helen vivía bajo el influjo de una obsesión. ¿Qué esperanzas podía albergar con respecto a su futuro?

Cuanto más pensaba en ello, más alarmada se sentía Margaret. Había ido posponiendo el tema durante meses, pero ahora ya no podía dejarlo de lado. Había, ¿por qué negarlo?, un toque de locura. ¿Estaba condenada Helen a que un incidente trivial, un incidente que puede suceder a cualquier joven, gobernase todos sus actos? ¿Puede construirse la naturaleza humana sobre unos cimientos tan nimios? Sí, aquel torpe y breve encuentro en Howards End fue vital. Germinó allí donde se agostan las relaciones más serias, fue más fuerte que la intimidad fraterna, más fuerte que la razón y que los libros. En uno de sus raptos de humor, Helen había confesado que aún lo recordaba con «cierta complacencia». Paul se había desvanecido, pero la magia de su caricia perduraba. Y donde hay complacencia en el pasado puede haber reacción: propagación en ambos sentidos.

Bien, es extraño y triste que nuestras mentes sean tierra de cultivo y que no podamos escoger la semilla. Pero el hombre es una extraña y triste criatura, demasiado ocupado en esquilmar la tierra e ignorante de lo que germina en su interior. Le aburre la psicología, la deja en manos del especialista, lo que equivale a dejar que su alimento se lo coma una locomotora. No quiere molestarse en digerir su propio espíritu. Margaret y Helen habían tenido más paciencia y, al parecer, Margaret había logrado el éxito en la medida en que el éxito es posible. Se entendía a sí misma, tenía un cierto y rudimentario control sobre su propio desarrollo. Si Helen había logrado el mismo éxito, eso ya no se puede decir.

El día en que mistress Munt se recobró, llegó una carta de Helen. La había enviado desde Múnich y anunciaba que su remitente estaría en Londres al día siguiente. Era una carta inquietante, si bien empezaba de un modo afectuoso y normal.

Queridísima Meg:

Dile a la tía Juley que Helen la quiere mucho. Dile que la quiero y que la he querido desde que tengo uso de razón. Llegaré a Londres el jueves.

En el banco tendrán mi dirección. Aún no he decidido el hotel, así que escribidme o telegrafiadme al banco y dadme noticias detalladas. Si la tía Juley está mejor o si, por alguna horrible razón, mi visita a Swanage careciera de objeto, no

os extrañéis de que no vaya. Tengo muchos planes en la cabeza. Por el momento vivo en el extranjero y quiero regresar tan pronto me sea posible. Por favor, dime dónde están nuestros muebles. Me gustaría recoger uno o dos libros; el resto es tuyo.

Perdóname, querida Meg. Esta carta te resultará molesta, pero todas las cartas vienen de tu hermana que te quiere,

Helen

Era una carta molesta porque tentó a Margaret a decir una mentira. Si decía que la tía Juley seguía en peligro, su hermana acudiría. La insanidad es contagiosa. El contacto con los que se hallan en un estado morboso produce idéntico deterioro. El «hacerlo para bien» podía beneficiar a Helen, pero perjudicaba a Margaret y, aún a riesgo de un desastre, ésta mantuvo sus principios una vez más. Contestó que su tía estaba mucho mejor y esperó acontecimientos.

Tibby aprobó la respuesta. Había madurado rápidamente y era un compañero más agradable que antes. Oxford le había hecho mucho bien. Había perdido su irritabilidad y su displicencia y ocultaba su desinterés por la gente y su interés por la comida. Pero no se había vuelto más humano. Los años comprendidos entre los dieciocho y los veintidós, mágicos para la mayoría de las personas, le conducían suavemente de la adolescencia a la madurez. Nunca conoció la juventud, ese hálito que calienta el corazón hasta la muerte, ese hálito que daba a míster Wilcox un encanto

imperecedero. Tibby era frío, sin que él tuviera la culpa y sin crueldad. Consideraba que Helen hacía mal y Margaret bien, pero los problemas familiares eran para él lo que para la mayoría de la gente es una escena de teatro. Sólo tenía una sugerencia que hacer y era característica en él:

—¿Por qué no se lo dices a míster Wilcox?

—¿Lo de Helen?

—Tal vez tenga experiencia en esta clase de cosas.

—Sí, Henry haría lo que pudiera, pero...

—Ya sé, tú sabes más que él, pero él es más práctico.

Era la fe del estudiante en los expertos. Margaret puso objeciones por una o dos razones. En aquel momento llegó la respuesta de Helen. Envió un telegrama reclamando la dirección del mobiliario, dado que quería regresar de inmediato. Margaret contestó: «De eso, ni hablar; ve a verme al banco a las cuatro.» Tibby y ella se fueron a Londres. Helen no estaba en el banco y allí se negaron a proporcionarles su dirección. Helen había terminado sumida en el caos.

Margaret abrazó a su hermano. Era todo lo que quedaba y nunca le había parecido más insustancial.

—Tibby, cariño, ¿qué hacemos ahora?

—Esto es extraordinario —contestó él.

—Querido, tus juicios son a menudo más claros que los míos. ¿Tienes alguna idea de lo que hay detrás de todo esto?

—No, a menos que sea algo mental.

—¡Ah, eso! —dijo Margaret—. Es imposible.

Pero la sugerencia ya había sido hecha y al cabo de unos minutos Margaret la hizo suya. No había otra explicación. Londres daba la razón a Tibby. La máscara caía del rostro de la ciudad y Margaret la vio como realmente era: una caricatura del infinito. Los obstáculos familiares, las calles por las que transitaban, las casas entre las que había hecho sus pequeños viajes durante tantos años, se volvieron súbitamente desdeñables. Helen parecía fundirse con los árboles polvorientos, con el tráfico y las clapas de barro que discurrían con lentitud. Había realizado un odioso acto de renuncia y

regresaba a la Unidad. La fe de Margaret se mantenía firme. Sabía que el alma humana se fundirá, si es que se funde, con las estrellas y con el mar. Sin embargo, sentía que su hermana había seguido un camino torcido durante muchos años. Era simbólico que la catástrofe se produjese ahora, en una tarde londinense, cuando la lluvia caía lentamente.

Henry era su última esperanza. Henry era definitivo. Él debía conocer algún pasadizo en el caos que ellos no alcanzaban a descubrir. Y así, se decidió a seguir el consejo de Tibby y a dejar el asunto en manos de su marido. Tenían que ir a verle a su oficina. Las cosas ya no podían empeorar. Entraron unos momentos en Saint Paul, cuya cúpula se erguía, ajena al torbellino circundante con tanta dignidad que parecía predicar un evangelio de formas. Pero en el interior, Saint Paul era como sus alrededores: ecos y murmullos, canciones ininteligibles, mosaicos invisibles, huellas húmedas que cruzaban y recruzaban el suelo. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*: Saint Paul nos devuelve a Londres. Allí no había esperanzas de encontrar a Helen.

Henry resultó poco satisfactorio al principio. Estaba muy contento de verla de vuelta de Swanage y poco dispuesto a admitir la aparición de un nuevo problema. Cuando le relataron su búsqueda se limitó a tomar el pelo a Tibby y a los Schelegel en general, y declaró que era «muy propio de Helen» llevar de coronilla a sus parientes.

—Esto es lo que todos decimos —contestó Margaret—. Pero, ¿por qué tiene que ser muy propio de Helen? ¿Qué le hace ser tan rara y volverse más rara cada vez?

—A mí no me lo preguntes. Yo sólo soy un sencillo hombre de negocios. Mi consejo a ambos es éste: no os preocupéis. Margaret, vuelves a tener ojeras. Ya sabes que te lo tengo terminantemente prohibido. Primero ha sido tu tía, luego tu hermana. No, no, esto no lo vamos a consentir, ¿verdad, Theobald? —hizo sonar un timbre—. Os daré un poco de té y luego te vas derechita a Ducie Street. No quiero que mi mujer parezca tan vieja como su marido.

—En cualquier caso, no ha comprendido usted nuestro punto de vista —dijo Tibby.

Míster Wilcox, que estaba de buen humor, replicó:

—Creo que nunca lo comprenderé —se reclinó en su asiento, riéndose de aquella familia tan dotada pero tan ridícula, mientras el fuego titilaba en el mapa de África. Margaret hizo señas a su hermano para que continuase. Éste obedeció con timidez.

—La opinión de Margaret es ésta —dijo—: nuestra hermana puede haberse vuelto loca.

Charles, que estaba trabajando en el despacho del fondo, asomó la cabeza.

—Entra, Charles —dijo Margaret amablemente—. ¿Quieres ayudarnos? Estamos metidos de nuevo en un lío.

—Me temo que no podré. ¿De qué se trata? Todos estamos un poco locos, hoy en día, ya se sabe.

—Los hechos son como sigue —dijo Tibby, que tenía a veces una pedante lucidez—. Los hechos son que ha estado en Inglaterra tres días sin querer vernos. Ha prohibido a su Banco que nos dé su dirección. Se niega a contestar a nuestras preguntas. Margaret opina que sus cartas son formales. Hay otros hechos, pero éstos son los más relevantes.

—¿Nunca se había comportado así anteriormente? —preguntó Henry.

—¡Desde luego que no! —dijo su mujer frunciendo el entrecejo.

—Bueno, querida, ¿cómo quieres que lo sepa?

Un absurdo sentimiento de molestia la invadió.

—Sabes de sobra que Helen nunca ha faltado al afecto —dijo—. Estoy segura de que ya lo habías advertido.

—Oh, sí; siempre nos hemos llevado bien ella y yo.

—No, Henry, ¿no lo entiendes? No me refiero a esto.

Se recobró, pero no sin que antes Charles la hubiese observado. Estúpido y atento, contemplaba la escena.

—Quería decir que cuando Helen era excéntrica en el pasado, se veía que su excentricidad procedía del corazón. Se comportaba de un modo extraño porque se preocupaba por alguien, o porque quería ayudar a alguien. Pero ahora no hay excusa posible para su conducta. Nos está hiriendo profundamente y por eso estoy segura

de que no está bien. «Locura» es una palabra terrible, pero Helen no está bien. No hablaría de mi hermana contigo si creyera que no le pasa nada... Quiero decir que no te molestaría por su causa.

Henry empezó a ponerse serio. La enfermedad era para él algo perfectamente definido. Él, que generalmente gozaba de buena salud, no podía comprender que los demás se hundieran en la enfermedad de un modo gradual. Los enfermos no tenían derechos, estaban fuera de toda categoría social, podía engañárseles sin remordimiento alguno. Cuando su mujer cayó enferma, él le prometió llevarla a Hertfordshire, pero, en vez de hacer lo que había prometido, la internó en una clínica. También Helen estaba enferma. Y el plan que concibió para su captura era inteligente y bien intencionado, pero contenía la ética del lobo.

—¿Queréis echarle mano? —dijo—. Éste es el problema, ¿no es así? Tiene que verla un médico.

—Por lo que sé, ya ha visitado a uno.

—Sí, sí; no me interrumpas —se puso en pie y pensó con intensidad. El anfitrión ingenioso y burlón desapareció y en su lugar vieron al hombre que había extraído dinero de Grecia y de África, al hombre que compraba bosques a los nativos a cambio de botellas de ginebra—. Ya lo tengo —dijo por fin—. Es muy fácil. Dejadlo en mis manos. Le haremos ir a Howards End.

—¿Cómo?

—A buscar los libros. Dile que tiene que recogerlos personalmente. Entonces puedes encontrarte con ella allí.

—Pero, Henry, eso es precisamente lo que Helen no quiere. Forma parte de su... lo que sea, el no verme.

—Claro, por supuesto no le vas a decir que tú irás. Cuando esté allí, buscando entre los paquetes, apareces tú. Si no pasa nada malo, tanto mejor. Pero el coche estará esperando en la esquina y podremos llevarla a un especialista en un santiamén.

Margaret agitó la cabeza.

—Es imposible.

—¿Por qué?

—Es imposible porque... —Margaret miró con tristeza a su marido—, porque éste no es el lenguaje que Helen y yo hablamos, si entiendes lo que quiero decir. Iría bien para otras personas, a las que, por otra parte, no tengo nada que reprochar.

—Pero Helen no habla ningún lenguaje —dijo Tibby—. Éste es nuestro problema. Ella no quiere hablar tu lenguaje y por eso mismo crees que está enferma.

—No, Henry, es muy bondadoso por tu parte, pero no podría hacer una cosa así.

—Ya veo —dijo él—, sientes escrúpulos.

—Eso supongo.

—Y antes que vencer tus escrúpulos, prefieres que tu hermana sufra. Podrías haberle hecho ir a Swanage con una sola palabra, pero sentías escrúpulos. Y los escrúpulos son una gran cosa. Yo soy tan escrupuloso como cualquiera; o al menos, eso espero, pero en un caso como éste, cuando se trata de una cuestión de locura...

—No admito que sea locura.

—Tú misma lo dijiste...

—Es locura cuando yo lo digo, pero no cuando lo dices tú.

Henry se encogió de hombros.

—¡Margaret, ¡Margaret! —refunfuñó—, no hay educación que enseñe lógica a las mujeres. Mira, querida, mi tiempo tiene un valor. ¿Quieres que te ayude, sí o no?

—De esta manera, no.

—Contesta a lo que te pregunto. A pregunta directa, respuesta directa. ¿Quieres...?

Charles les sorprendió con una interrupción.

—Padre, sería mejor que dejáramos Howards End al margen de la cuestión —dijo.

—¿Por qué, Charles?

Charles no podía dar ninguna razón, pero Margaret sintió como si, desde una tremenda distancia, una salutación hubiese pasado entre ellos.

—La casa está hecha un lío —dijo secamente—. Sería mejor para nosotros no armar más lío aún.

—¿Y quiénes somos «nosotros»? —preguntó su padre—. Dime, hijo, por favor, ¿quiénes somos «nosotros»?

—Te ruego que me disculpes —dijo Charles—, ya veo que me he metido en lo que no me concierne.

Por entonces Margaret deseaba no haber mencionado jamás el problema a su marido. Pero la retirada era imposible. Henry estaba decidido a llevar el asunto a una conclusión satisfactoria, y la imagen de Helen se fue diluyendo a medida que hablaba. Su cabellera rubia y ondulante y sus ojos inquietos ya no contaban para nada, porque estaba enferma, sin derechos, y cualquiera de sus amigos estaba autorizado a cazarla. Con el corazón dolorido, Margaret se unió a la cacería. Escribió una carta a su hermana al dictado de su marido; dijo que el mobiliario estaba en Howards End, pero que podía ir a verlo el lunes a las tres de la tarde, aprovechando que una mujer de limpieza estaría en la casa. Era una carta fría, y por ello tanto más plausible. Helen pensaría que Margaret estaba ofendida. Y aquel lunes, Margaret y Henry irían a comer con Dolly y luego se emboscarían en el jardín.

Cuando Margaret y Tibby se hubieron ido, míster Wilcox comentó a su hijo:

—No me gusta este comportamiento, hijo. Margaret es demasiado bondadosa para molestarse, pero si ella no se ofende, yo sí.

Charles no contestó.

—¿Te pasa algo esta tarde, Charles?

—No, padre; pero me temo que te estás metiendo en un asunto de más envergadura de lo que tú supones.

—¿En qué sentido?

—A mí no me lo preguntes.

CAPÍTULO XXXV

Se habla de los cambios de humor de la primavera, pero los días, que son sus verdaderos hijos, tienen su propio humor: están llenos de brisas que van y vienen y del murmullo de los pájaros. Pueden brotar nuevas flores, crecer la verde puntilla de los setos, pero el mismo cielo planea sobre todo, suave, espeso y azul; las mismas figuras, vistas y no vistas, vagan por los bosquecillos y los prados. La mañana que Margaret había pasado con miss Avery y la tarde en que salió a atrapar a Helen eran platillos de la misma balanza. El tiempo parecía no haberse movido, la lluvia no parecía haber caído, y sólo el hombre, con sus esquemas y sus enfermedades, turbaba la Naturaleza hasta verla a través de un velo de lágrimas.

Margaret no volvió a protestar. Tanto si Henry obraba bien como si obraba mal, se había comportado con amabilidad y Margaret no conocía otro rasero con el que juzgarse. Tenía que confiar en él de un modo absoluto. Apenas se había hecho cargo del asunto, su necedad se desvaneció. No dejaba al azar el menor detalle y la captura de Helen prometía una puesta en escena tan hábil como la boda de Evie.

Fueron a Hilton por la mañana, como habían convenido, y descubrieron que su víctima ya estaba allí. A su llegada, Henry visitó todas las caballerizas donde alquilaban coches y conversó unos minutos con los propietarios. Margaret no supo lo que les dijo —quizá no les dijera la verdad—, pero, en cualquier caso, después de comer les comunicaron que una dama había llegado en el tren de Londres y había tomado un coche para ir a Howards End.

—Tenía que venir necesariamente —dijo Henry—. Allí están sus libros.

—No acabo de decidirme —dijo Margaret por centésima vez.

—Termínate el café, querida, tenemos que salir.

—Sí, Margaret, tienes que tomar mucho —dijo Dolly.

Margaret hizo un esfuerzo, pero, de pronto, se llevó la mano a los ojos. Dolly intentó captar un gesto de su suegro, que no respondió. En el silencio se oyó al automóvil situarse a la puerta de la casa.

—No estás preparada para el encuentro —dijo Henry nerviosamente—. Déjame que vaya solo. Yo sé lo que hay que hacer.

—Sí, sí que estoy preparada —dijo Margaret destapándose la cara—. Sólo estoy terriblemente preocupada. No puedo creer que Helen esté realmente viva. Sus cartas y sus telegramas parecían venir de otra persona. No reconozco su voz. No puedo creer que el chófer la viera en la estación. Ojalá nunca hubiera mencionado este asunto. Sé que Charles está ofendido. Sí, lo está... —besó la mano de Dolly—. Dolly me perdonará. Ahora, vámonos.

Henry había estado contemplándola con atención. No le gustaba aquella crisis.

—¿No quieres lavarte? —preguntó.

—¿Tengo tiempo?

—Sí, de sobra.

Margaret se fue al lavabo próximo a la puerta de entrada y apenas hubo echado el pestillo, míster Wilcox dijo con calma:

—Doy, me voy solo.

Los ojos de Dolly se iluminaron con una excitación vulgar. Le siguió de puntillas hasta el coche.

—Dile que creí que sería mejor así.

—Sí, míster Wilcox, ya lo entiendo.

—Dile lo que quieras.

El coche arrancó y se habría alejado de no haberse interpuesto ningún obstáculo, pero el chiquitín estaba jugando en el césped y escogió aquel preciso instante para sentarse en mitad del sendero. Crane, al intentar sortearlo, aplastó con la rueda un macizo de flores. Dolly gritó. Margaret, advertida por el ruido, salió corriendo, sin sombrero, y tuvo tiempo de saltar al estribo. No dijo una sola palabra: Henry la estaba tratando como ella misma había tratado a Helen y la rabia que le produjo la falta de honestidad de aquél le sirvió para prever lo que sentiría Helen llegado el momento. Pensó: «Me lo tengo merecido. Recibo el castigo por haber cedido en mis principios.» Y aceptó las disculpas de su marido con una calma que sorprendió a Henry.

—Sigo pensando que no estás preparada —repitió él.

—Quizá no lo estaba durante la comida, pero ahora lo veo todo con claridad.

—Sólo quiero que las cosas salgan del mejor modo posible.

—Préstame tu bufanda, ¿quieres? Este viento me revuelve los cabellos.

—Claro, querida. ¿Te sientes bien?

—Mira, ya no me tiemblan las manos.

—¿Y me has perdonado? Bien, entonces, escucha: el coche de Helen ya debe de haber llegado a Howards End. Vamos un poco retrasados, pero no importa. Nuestro primer paso será enviar este coche a la granja y, si es posible, evitaremos una escena delante de los criados. Cierto caballero —señaló la espalda de Crane— no llegará hasta la casa, sino que esperará en la entrada, detrás de los laureles. ¿Tienes aún las llaves?

—Sí.

—Bueno, no las necesitas. ¿Recuerdas cómo es la casa?

—Sí.

—Si no la encuentras en el porche podemos dar la vuelta al jardín. Nuestro objetivo...

Se detuvieron a recoger al médico.

—Le estaba diciendo a mi mujer, Mansbridge, que nuestro objetivo primordial es no asustar a miss Schlegel. La casa, como

sabe, es de mi propiedad, así que nada más natural que nuestra presencia. El problema es evidentemente nervioso, ¿no te parece, Margaret?

El médico, un hombre joven, empezó a hacer preguntas sobre Helen: ¿Era normal? ¿Algo congénito o hereditario? ¿Había ocurrido algo que pudiese haber causado el extrañamiento de Helen?

—Nada —contestó Margaret, y se preguntó a sí misma qué habría sucedido de haber añadido—: Aunque se resiente de la inmoralidad de mi marido.

—Siempre fue muy fuerte —prosiguió Henry reclinándose en su asiento del coche cuando pasaron ante la iglesia—. Con tendencia a la espiritualidad y todas esas cosas, pero nada serio. Música, literatura, arte... aunque yo diría que era normal... una chica encantadora.

La rabia y el terror de Margaret iban en aumento. ¡Cómo se atrevían aquellos hombres a catalogar a su hermana! ¡Qué horrores les deparaba el futuro! ¡Qué impertinencias se ocultaban bajo el nombre de la ciencia! El grupo estaba echándose sobre Helen para negar sus derechos humanos y a Margaret le pareció que todos los Schlegel estaban siendo amenazados al mismo tiempo. «¿Eran normales?» ¡Menuda pregunta! ¡Y son siempre los que no saben nada de la naturaleza humana los que la formulan; los que se aburren, se extrañan y se sorprenden con la psicología! Por lastimoso que fuera el estado de su hermana, Margaret sabía que tenía que ponerse a su lado. Ambas asumirían la locura si el mundo decidía considerarlas como tales.

Eran las tres y cinco. El coche se detuvo cerca de la granja, en un patio en el que se hallaba miss Avery. Henry le preguntó si había pasado un coche por allí. La anciana dijo que sí y al cabo de un instante lo vieron al final del sendero. El coche rodó silencioso como un animal de presa. Tan confiada estaba Helen que se había sentado en el porche, dando la espalda a la carretera. Había venido. Sólo quedaban a la vista su cabeza y sus hombros, enmarcados por la parra. Una de sus manos jugueteaba con los capullos. El viento arremolinaba sus cabellos, el sol la glorificaba: era la Helen de siempre.

Margaret ocupaba el asiento contiguo a la puerta. Antes de que su marido pudiera impedírselo, saltó del coche. Corrió a la verja del jardín, que estaba cerrada, la cruzó y la cerró deliberadamente en las narices de Henry. El ruido alarmó a Helen. Margaret la vio levantarse con movimientos desacostumbrados y, precipitándose en el porche comprendió la simple explicación de todos sus temores: su hermana estaba embarazada.

—¿Se encuentra bien esa pillina? —gritó Henry.

Margaret tuvo tiempo de murmurar:

—Oh, querida...

Las llaves de la casa estaban en su mano. Abrió Howards End e hizo entrar a Helen.

—Sí, está bien —dijo, y apoyó la espalda contra la puerta.

CAPÍTULO XXXVI

—¡Margaret, pareces preocupada! —dijo Henry.

Mansbridge le seguía, Crane estaba junto a la verja y el cochero se había puesto de pie en el pescante. Margaret agitó la cabeza; no podía hablar. Se quedó con las llaves engarfiadas, como si el futuro de todos dependiera de ellas. Henry le hacía más preguntas. Agitó de nuevo la cabeza. Sus palabras no tenían sentido. Le oyó preguntar por qué había hecho entrar a Helen. «De poco me das un golpe con la verja», fue otra de sus observaciones. Luego se oyó hablar a sí misma. Ella, u otra persona en su nombre, dijo: «Vete.» Henry se aproximó repitiendo: «Margaret, pareces preocupada. Dame las llaves, querida. ¿Qué le pasa a Helen?» —Por favor, Henry, vete. Yo lo arreglaré todo.

—¿Qué hay que arreglar?

Alargó las manos en busca de las llaves. Margaret habría obedecido de no haber sido por el médico.

—Al menos impide esto —dijo en tono lastimero. El médico había dado media vuelta y estaba interrogando al cochero que había traído a Helen. Un nuevo sentimiento le invadió: era la lucha de las mujeres contra los hombres. Le traían sin cuidado los derechos, pero si los hombres entraban en Howards End, lo harían pasando por encima de su cadáver.

—Vamos, Margaret, ésta es una extraña forma de empezar —dijo su marido.

Regresó el médico y susurró unas palabras al oído de míster Wilcox: el escándalo se había desencadenado. Sinceramente horrorizado, Henry bajó los ojos.

—No puedo evitarlo —dijo Margaret—. Espera. No es culpa mía. Tengan la bondad de irse los cuatro.

El cochero estaba murmurando algo al oído de Crane.

—Confiamos en que usted nos ayude, mistress Wilcox —dijo el joven médico—. ¿Quiere entrar y convencer a su hermana para que salga?

—¿Con qué objeto? —dijo Margaret mirándole fijamente a los ojos.

Considerando que mentir era muy profesional, el médico farfulló algo relativo a la crisis nerviosa.

—Le ruego que me perdone, pero no se trata de nada por el estilo. No está usted cualificado para atender a mi hermana, míster Mansbridge. Si necesitamos de sus servicios, ya se lo haremos saber.

—Puedo diagnosticar el caso más claramente, si usted lo desea —replicó el médico.

—Podría, en efecto, pero no lo ha hecho. No está, por tanto, cualificado para atender a mi hermana.

—¡Vamos, vamos, Margaret! —dijo Henry levantando los ojos del suelo—. Este asunto es espantoso, un asunto horrible. Son órdenes del doctor. Abre la puerta.

—Discúlpame, pero no pienso hacerlo.

—No estoy de acuerdo con tu actitud.

Margaret guardó silencio.

—Este asunto es tan serio como complicado —contribuyó el médico—. Será mejor que todos cooperemos. Nosotros la necesitamos a usted tanto como ustedes nos necesitan a nosotros, mistress Wilcox.

—Exacto —dijo Henry.

—Yo no le necesito a usted de ningún modo —dijo Margaret.

Los dos hombres se miraron inquietos.

—Y mi hermana tampoco le necesita. Todavía le faltan varias semanas para el parto.

—¡Margaret! ¡Margaret!

—Bueno, Henry, despide al doctor. ¿De qué nos sirve?

Míster Wilcox paseó los ojos por la casa. Tenía la vaga impresión de que debía mantenerse firme y apoyar con su actitud al médico. Él mismo podía necesitar apoyo, porque se avecinaban problemas.

—Por el momento es sólo cuestión de afecto —dijo Margaret—. Afecto, ¿lo entienden? —volviendo a sus métodos habituales, escribió la palabra en la pared—. Estoy segura de que lo entienden. Yo quiero mucho a Helen. Tú, Henry, un poco menos. Míster Mansbridge ni siquiera la conoce. Eso es todo. Y el afecto, cuando es recíproco, da derechos. Apúntelo en su agenda, míster Mansbridge. Es una fórmula muy útil.

Henry le rogó que tuviese calma.

—No saben ustedes lo que quieren —dijo Margaret cruzándose de brazos—. Si me hicieran una observación sensata, les dejaría entrar. Pero no pueden hacerla. Molestarían a mi hermana sin ningún motivo. Y eso no lo voy a permitir. Antes me pasaría aquí el día entero.

—Mansbridge —dijo Henry en voz baja—, quizá ahora no.

El bloque se resquebrajaba. A una seña de su amo, Crane volvió junto al coche.

—Ahora tú, Henry —dijo ella con dulzura. Su amargura no iba dirigida contra él—. Vete, querido. Más tarde necesitaré de tu consejo, no lo dudes. Perdóname si me he comportado bruscamente. Pero ahora, en serio, tienes que irte.

Henry estaba demasiado estupefacto para irse. Míster Mansbridge le llamó en voz baja.

—Me reuniré contigo en seguida en casa de Dolly —dijo Margaret cuando la puerta de la verja se cerró entre ellos. El coche de alquiler se apartó, el automóvil hizo marcha atrás, giró un poco, volvió a hacer marcha atrás y dio la vuelta en la estrecha carretera. Una hilera de carros se acercaba. Margaret esperó; no había ninguna prisa. Cuando el camino quedó expedito y el automóvil arrancó, abrió la puerta.

—¡Oh, querida! —dijo—. Querida Helen, perdóname.

Helen estaba de pie en el vestíbulo.

CAPÍTULO XXXVII

Margaret echó el cerrojo a la puerta. Habría besado a su hermana, pero Helen, con una voz digna que sonaba extraña en ella, dijo:

—¡Qué comodidad! No me dijiste que los libros estaban desempaquetados. Ya he encontrado casi todo lo que quiero.

—No te dije la verdad sobre nada.

—Es cierto, ha sido una enorme sorpresa. ¿Ha estado enferma la tía Juley?

—¡Helen! ¿Me crees capaz de inventar una cosa semejante?

—No —dijo Helen dándose la vuelta y rompiendo a llorar—, pero se acaba por perder la fe, después de una cosa así.

—Creíamos que estabas enferma, pero... a pesar de todo... me he comportado de un modo indigno.

Helen escogió otro libro.

—No tenía que haber consultado a nadie. ¿Qué habría pensado de mí nuestro padre?

No pensaba hacer preguntas a su hermana ni formularle reproches. Ambas cosas podían aguardar. Antes tenía que purgar un crimen mayor que cualquiera que Helen hubiese cometido: la falta de confianza, que es obra del diablo.

—Sí, estoy molesta —replicó Helen—. Tendríais que haber respetado mis deseos. Habría soportado este encuentro si hubiera sido necesario, pero una vez la tía Juley se recobró, no lo era. Planear mi vida como ahora tengo que hacer...

—¡Deja ya estos libros! —dijo Margaret—. Helen, háblame.

—Estaba diciendo que he dejado de vivir al azar. Para poder soportar los grandes... —se saltó la palabra—, hay que hacer planes con antelación. Voy a tener un hijo en junio y, en primer lugar, la conversación, las discusiones y las excitaciones no me convienen. Las soportaré si es preciso, pero después. En segundo lugar, no puedo quedarme en Inglaterra, según entiendo. He hecho algo que los ingleses no perdonan. No sería correcto que me perdonaran. De modo que debo vivir donde nadie me conozca.

—¿Pero por qué no me lo dijiste, querida?

—Sí —replicó Helen—, podría haberlo hecho, pero decidí esperar.

—Creo que nunca me lo habrías dicho.

—Sí, lo habría hecho. Hemos tomado un piso en Múnich.

Margaret miró por la ventana.

—Cuando digo «hemos» me refiero a Mónica y a mí. Pero, aparte de Mónica, estoy sola, quiero estarlo y siempre lo querré.

—No sabía nada de Mónica.

—Es lógico. Es una italiana, de nacimiento al menos. Es periodista. La conocí en Garda. Mónica es la mujer idónea para cuidar de mí.

—Veo que le tienes mucho aprecio.

—Ha sido extraordinariamente buena conmigo.

Margaret se imaginó a Mónica: el clásico tipo llamado «italiano inglesiato», la cruda feminista que uno admira, pero evita. ¡Y Helen había recurrido a ella en su necesidad!

—No creas que no volveremos a vernos nunca más —dijo Helen con una mesurada dulzura—. Siempre tendré una habitación para ti, y cuanto más tiempo puedas pasar conmigo, mejor. Pero aún no has comprendido, Meg. Claro, te resulta muy difícil. Esto es una conmoción para ti. No lo es para mí, que he estado pensando en nuestro futuro durante muchos meses. Unos pequeños contratiempos no alterarán mis planes. No puedo vivir en Inglaterra.

—Helen, no me has perdonado mi traición. No me hablarías así si me hubieras perdonado.

—Oh, Meg, querida, ¿por qué estamos hablando? —dejó caer un libro y suspiró hondamente. Luego, recobrándose, dijo—: Dime, ¿cómo es que todos los libros están aquí?

—Por una serie de errores.

—Y buena parte del mobiliario ha sido desembalado.

—Todo.

—¿Quién vive aquí?

—Nadie.

—Vais a alquilar la casa, supongo.

—La casa está muerta —dijo Margaret con un fruncimiento del entrecejo—. ¿Por qué preocuparse por ella?

—A mí me interesa. Hablas como si yo hubiese perdido todo interés en la vida. Pero soy aún Helen, espero. Además, no da la impresión de ser una casa muerta. El vestíbulo parece más vivo incluso que en los viejos tiempos, cuando contenía las cosas de los Wilcox.

—Interesada, ¿eh? Bien, supongo que debo contártelo. Mi marido nos prestó la casa a condición de que... Pero por error, nuestras cosas fueron desembaladas y miss Avery... en lugar de... —se detuvo—. Mira, no puedo seguir así. Te advierto que no voy a seguir. Helen, ¿por qué eres tan dura conmigo?, ¿simplemente porque odias a Henry?

—Ya no le odio —dijo Helen—. He dejado de ser una colegiala y, Meg, te lo digo una vez más, no estoy siendo dura. Pero de eso a integrarme en vuestra vida inglesa... no, quítatelo de la cabeza. ¿Me imaginas de visita en Ducie Street? Es impensable.

Margaret no la pudo contradecir. Era espantoso verla moverse tranquilamente con sus proyectos, ni triste ni excitada, ni alegando inocencia ni declarándose culpable, deseando sólo la libertad y la compañía de aquellos que no la culpaban. ¿Por cuánto habría tenido que pasar? Margaret lo ignoraba. Pero habría sido lo suficiente como para apartarla de sus antiguas costumbres y de sus viejos amigos.

—Háblame de ti —dijo Helen, que había seleccionado sus libros y vagaba por entre el mobiliario.

—No hay nada que contar.

—¿Eres feliz en tu matrimonio, Meg?

—Sí, pero no tengo ganas de hablar.

—Igual me siento yo.

—No es eso, es que no puedo.

—Y yo tampoco. Es una lástima, pero no vale la pena intentarlo.

Algo había ocurrido entre ellas. Quizá era la Sociedad, que en adelante iba a excluir a Helen. Quizá era una tercera vida, ya presente en espíritu. No podían encontrar un lugar de reunión. Ambas sufrían agudamente y no les consolaba el saber que sobrevivía el afecto.

—Margaret, ¿no hay moros en la costa?

—¿Ya quieres alejarte de mí?

—Eso supongo... ¡Oh, querida! Es inútil. Sabía que no tendríamos nada que decirnos. Dale recuerdos a la tía Juley y a Tibby, y para ti, más cariño del que puedo expresar. Prométeme venir a verme a Múnich más adelante.

—Por supuesto, querida.

—Esto es todo lo que puedo hacer.

Así parecía. Lo más angustioso era el sentido común de Helen: Mónica le había hecho mucho bien.

—Me alegro de haberte visto y de haber visto también nuestras cosas.

Miró la librería con cariño, como si estuviera despidiéndose del pasado.

Margaret corrió el pestillo.

—El automóvil se ha ido y ahí está tu coche —observó.

Se encaminó hacia este último, contemplando las hojas y el cielo. La primavera parecía más hermosa que nunca. El cochero, que estaba apoyado en la verja, la llamó.

—Señora, hay un mensaje —y le tendió una tarjeta de visita de Henry por entre los barrotes.

—¿Cómo ha llegado hasta aquí? —preguntó Margaret.

Crane había regresado al cabo de un instante trayéndola.

Margaret leyó la tarjeta con disgusto. Estaba escrita en francés y contenía instrucciones. Cuando su hermana y ella hubiesen hablado, debía volver a pasar la noche a casa de Dolly. *Il faut dormir sur ce sujet.* En cuanto a Helen, había que encontrarle *une confortable chambre àl'hôtel.* Esta última frase le disgustó grandemente hasta que recordó que la casa de Charles sólo tenía una habitación libre y que no podían alojar a un tercer huésped.

—Henry haría lo que pudiera —interpretó.

Helen no le había seguido al jardín. Una vez abierta la puerta, había perdido las ansias de huir. Permanecía en el vestíbulo, yendo de la librería a la mesa. Cada vez se parecía más a la antigua Helen, irresponsable y encantadora.

—¿Es ésta la casa de míster Wilcox? —preguntó.

—No me digas que no te acuerdas de Howards End.

—¿Acordarme? ¡Yo, que no me olvido de nada! No, decía que ahora parece nuestra casa.

—Miss Avery es extraordinaria —dijo Margaret levantando un poco su espíritu. Una vez más se sintió invadida por un ligero sentimiento de deslealtad. Pero aquello le aliviaba y se dejó llevar por él—. Quería mucho a mistress Wilcox y prefirió amueblar la casa con nuestras cosas antes que saberla vacía. En consecuencia, aquí está la biblioteca.

—Faltan algunos libros. ¿Ves? No ha desembalado los libros de arte, con lo cual ha demostrado muy buen sentido. Y nosotros no teníamos la espada en ese sitio.

—Sin embargo, no hace mal papel.

—Oh, no, magnífico.

—¿Verdad que sí?

—¿Dónde está el piano, Meg?

—Lo dejé en un almacén, en Londres, ¿por qué?

—Por nada.

—Es curioso, pero las alfombras también encajan a las mil maravillas.

—Las alfombras son una equivocación —anunció Helen—. Ya sé que las teníamos en Londres, pero este suelo tendría que estar descubierto. Es muy bonito.

—Sigues con la manía de las habitaciones con pocos muebles. ¿Te importaría entrar en el comedor antes de irte? Ahí no hay alfombras.

Entraron y a cada instante que transcurría su charla era más natural.

—¡Oh, menudo sitio para el costurero de mamá! —gritó Helen.

—Mira las sillas, en cambio.

—¡Qué cosa! Wickham Place estaba orientado al Norte, ¿no?

—Al noroeste.

—En cualquier caso, hace treinta años que estas sillas no habían recibido un rayo de sol. Los respaldos están calientes.

—¿Y por qué miss Avery habrá situado las sillas aparejadas? Voy a...

—Aquí, Meg, ponía de forma que se pueda ver el prado.

Margaret cambió de sitio una silla. Helen se sentó.

—Sí... la ventana es demasiado alta.

—Prueba con la silla del salón.

—No, no me gusta el salón. Las vigas están cubiertas. De otro modo habría sido muy bonito.

—¡Helen, qué memoria tienes para ciertas cosas! Tienes razón. Es una habitación que los hombres han estropeado queriendo hacerla agradable a las mujeres. Los hombres no saben lo que queremos.

—Y nunca lo sabrán.

—No estoy de acuerdo. Dentro de dos mil años lo sabrán.

—Pero las sillas tienen un aspecto inmejorable. Mira, aquí es donde Tibby derramó la sopa.

—El café. Estoy segura de que era el café.

Helen agitó la cabeza.

—Imposible. Tibby era demasiado pequeño para tomar café en aquella época.

—¿Vivía papá?

—Sí.

—En ese caso, tienes razón y debió de ser sopa. Yo pensaba en algo que ocurrió mucho después, una desafortunada visita de la tía Juley, que no se dio cuenta de que Tibby había crecido. En este caso era café, porque lo tiró a propósito. Había una cancioncilla, «té, café... café, té», que ella le cantaba cada mañana a la hora del desayuno. Espera, ¿cómo hacía?

—Ya sé... no, no recuerdo... Qué niño más odioso era Tibby.

—Pero la cancioncilla era horrible. Ninguna persona decente la habría soportado.

—Ah, ese ciruelo —exclamó Helen como si el jardín formara también parte de su infancia—. ¿Por qué lo relaciono con las pesas? Y ahí vienen las gallinas. El césped necesita una buena podada. Me gustan las oropéndolas...

Margaret le interrumpió.

—Ya lo tengo —dijo—:

Té, té, café, té
o chocola-a-té.

y así cada mañana durante tres meses. No me extraña que Tibby se comportara como un salvaje.

—Tibby es un encanto ahora, con moderación —dijo Helen.

—¡Vaya! Ya sabía que acabarías diciendo esto. Ya lo creo que es un encanto.

Sonó una campana.

—¡Escucha! ¿Qué es eso?

Helen dijo:

—A lo mejor son los Wilcox, que están empezando el asedio.

—¡No digas tonterías! Escucha.

La expresión de trivialidad se borró de sus rostros, aunque dejó algo tras de sí: la conciencia de que nunca podrían separarse porque su cariño tenía raíces en las cosas comunes. Las explicaciones y los ruegos habían fracasado; habían buscado un punto común y sólo habían conseguido hacerse daño la una a la otra. Y, no obstante, durante todo aquel rato la salvación estaba a su alrededor: el pasado que santificaba el presente; el presente con un latido salvaje, declarando que a pesar de todo habría un futuro con risas y voces de niños. Helen, sin dejar de sonreír, se acercó a su hermana.

—Eres la misma Meg de siempre —dijo. Las dos se miraron a los ojos: la vida interior había dado sus frutos.

La campanilla repicó solemnemente. En la puerta frontal no había nadie. Margaret fue a la cocina y se abrió paso entre las cajas de embalar hasta la ventana.

Los visitantes no eran más que un niño con un pote de hojalata. La trivialidad volvió.

—¿Qué quieres, niño?

—Traigo la leche.

—¿Te envía miss Avery? —dijo Margaret en un tono un poco tajante.

—Sí, señora.

—Entonces vuélvete y dile que no necesitamos leche —dirigiéndose a Helen—: No es un asedio, pero posiblemente se trate de un intento de aprovisionarnos en vistas a un asedio.

—A mí me gusta la leche —exclamó Helen—. ¿Por qué despides al chico?

—¿De veras? Muy bien. Pero no tenemos dónde echarla, y él necesitará el pote.

—No, señora, vendré mañana a buscarlo —dijo el niño.

—Mañana la casa estará cerrada.

—¿Quiere que también le traiga huevos, mañana?

—¿Tú eres el niño que vi la semana pasada jugando en el pajar?

El chico dijo que sí con la cabeza.

—Muy bien, pues vuelve corriendo a jugar.

—Qué niño tan guapo —susurró Helen—. Di, ¿cómo te llamas? Yo me llamo Helen.

—Tom.

Era un gesto típico de Helen. Los Wilcox también le habrían preguntado el nombre al niño, pero nunca le habrían dicho el suyo a cambio.

—Tom, ésta es Margaret. Y en casa tenemos uno llamado Tibby.

—Los míos son de orejas gachas —contestó Tom creyendo que Tibby era un conejo.

—Eres un niño muy bueno y bastante listo. Acuérdate de volver. Es encantador, ¿verdad?

—Sí, claro —dijo Margaret—. Debe de ser hijo de Madge, y Madge es horrible. Pero este lugar tiene poderes mágicos.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—No lo sé.

—Lo digo porque probablemente estaré de acuerdo contigo.

—Quiero decir que mata lo feo y hace vivir lo hermoso.

—Estoy de acuerdo —dijo Helen sorbiendo la leche—. Pero tú decías no hace ni media hora que la casa estaba muerta.

—Quise decir que yo estaba muerta. Así me sentía.

—Sí, la casa tiene una vida más sana que nosotros, aun estando vacía como ésta. No puedo creer que nuestros muebles no hayan visto el sol durante treinta años. Bien pensado, Wickham Place era una tumba. Meg, tengo una idea magnífica.

—¿De qué se trata?

—Bebe un poco de leche para reforzarte.

Margaret obedeció.

—No, aún no te lo voy a decir —dijo Helen—, porque podrías reírte o enfadarte. Vamos al piso de arriba y aireemos un poco las habitaciones.

Abrieron una ventana tras otra hasta que el interior vibró con la primavera. Las cortinas revoloteaban, los cuadros tableteaban

alegremente. Helen profería gritos de excitación cuando encontraba que una cama estaba en su lugar, o que otra estaba en un sitio equivocado. Se enfadó con miss Avery por no haber subido los armarios. «Así habríamos podido ver el efecto.» Admiró la vista. Era la misma Helen que había escrito aquellas memorables cartas cuatro años atrás. Cuando se asomaron, mirando hacia el poniente, dijo:

—Te voy a contar mi idea. ¿No podríamos pasar la noche tú y yo en la casa?

—No creo —dijo Margaret.

—Tenemos camas, mesas, toallas...

—Ya lo sé, pero no está previsto que durmamos aquí. Henry sugería que...

—No he pedido ninguna sugerencia. No pienso modificar mis planes en lo más mínimo. Pero me resultaría muy agradable pasar aquí la noche contigo. Sería algo que luego podríamos recordar. ¡Oh, Meg, hagámoslo!

—Pero, Helen, pequeña —dijo Margaret—, no podemos quedarnos sin permiso de Henry. Por supuesto que nos lo daría, pero tú misma dijiste que no podrías visitar Ducie Street, y esta casa es tan íntima como aquélla.

—Ducie Street es su casa. Ésta es la nuestra. Nuestros muebles, la gente de nuestra clase que llama a la puerta... Quedémonos aquí, sólo una noche. Tom nos traerá huevos y leche. ¿Por qué no? Es un antojo.

Margaret vacilaba.

—Presiento que a Charles no le va a gustar —dijo por fin—. Le molestaban nuestros muebles, y yo ya estaba dispuesta a retirarlos, cuando la enfermedad de la tía Juley me lo impidió. Comprendo muy bien a Charles. Siente que ésta es la casa de su madre, le tiene un verdadero afecto, un afecto desinteresado. Puedo responder por Henry, pero no por Charles.

—Ya sé que no le gustará —dijo Helen—. Pero, mira, voy a alejarme para siempre de sus vidas. Así que, a la larga, dime, ¿qué diferencia supondrá esto? Podrán decir: «Hasta llegó a pasar una noche en Howards End», y eso es todo.

—¿Cómo sabes que te alejarás de sus vidas para siempre? Ya lo habíamos creído dos veces antes de ahora.

—Porque mis planes...

—.. .que cambias a cada instante.

—Entonces, porque mi vida es grande y la suya, pequeña —dijo Helen acalorándose—. Yo sé cosas que ellos ignoran, y tú también las sabes. Nosotras *sabemos* que existe la poesía. Nosotras *sabemos* que existe la muerte. Ellos sólo lo saben de oídas. Nosotras sabemos que ésta es nuestra casa, porque eso es algo que se siente. Ah, sí, ya sé que pueden enarbolar sus títulos de propiedad y sus llaves, pero por esta noche, estamos en casa.

—Me gustaría estar contigo a solas una vez más —dijo Margaret —. Tal vez sea una oportunidad entre mil.

—Sí, y podríamos hablar —bajó la voz—. Mi historia no es muy gloriosa. Bajo este olmo, sinceramente, veo en el futuro muy poca felicidad. ¿No puedo pasar esta noche contigo?

—No hace falta que te diga lo que eso significaría para mí.

—Entonces, hagámoslo.

—No sirve de nada dudar. ¿Me dejas que vaya a Hilton y obtenga el permiso?

—No necesitamos permiso.

Pero Margaret era una mujer leal. A pesar de la imaginación y la poesía, o quizá por ello, comprendía la actitud técnica que adoptaría Henry. A ser posible, también ella sería «técnica». El alojamiento por una noche —y no pedían más— no requería una discusión sobre principios generales.

—Charles se negará —refunfuñó Helen.

—No le consultaremos.

—Ve, si quieres; yo me habría quedado sin permiso.

Era ese toque de egoísmo que no conseguía estropear el carácter de Helen y que incluso añadía algo a su belleza. Helen se habría quedado sin permiso y se habría escapado a Alemania a la mañana siguiente. Margaret le dio un beso.

—Volveré antes del anochecer. Lo deseo fervientemente. Es muy tuyo haber tenido esta idea tan hermosa.

—No es una idea; es sólo un final —dijo Helen con bastante tristeza. Un sentimiento de tragedia se abatió sobre Margaret de nuevo tan pronto se alejó de la casa.

Tenía miedo de miss Avery. Es inquietante cumplir una profecía, por muy superficial que ésta sea. Se alegró de no ver ninguna figura contemplándola cuando pasó por delante de la granja. Sólo Tom daba saltos mortales en el pajar.

CAPÍTULO XXXVIII

La tragedia empezó de un modo tranquilo y, como muchas otras conversaciones, por la torpe afirmación masculina de su superioridad. Henry la oyó discutir con el conductor, salió, arregló el asunto con el individuo, que tenía una cierta inclinación a ser grosero, y luego la condujo a las sillas del césped. Dolly, a quien nadie había contado nada, corrió a ofrecerles té. Henry rehusó y le ordenó que se llevase el cochecito del niño, pues deseaban estar solos.

—¡Pero si este cielito no entiende nada! Sólo tiene nueve meses —rogó Dolly.

—Eso no es lo que acabo de decir —respondió su suegro.

El niño fue retirado fuera del alcance de la conversación y no tuvo conocimiento de la crisis hasta muchos años más tarde. Ahora le tocaba el turno a Margaret.

—¿Es lo que oímos? —preguntó Henry.

—Sí.

—Querida —empezó a decir—, se avecina un problema grave y nada logrará sacarnos de él si no es la absoluta sinceridad. Tenemos que hablar claramente —Margaret inclinó la cabeza—. Me veo obligado a hacerte una serie de preguntas relativas a este asunto que ambos preferiríamos pasar por alto. Como sabes, yo no soy uno de esos personajes de vuestro Bernard Shaw, que consideran que nada es sagrado en este mundo. Hablar como tengo que hacerlo me produce una profunda pena, pero hay ocasiones... Somos marido y mujer, no niños. Yo soy un hombre de mundo y tú eres una mujer excepcional.

Todos los sentidos abandonaron a Margaret. Enrojeció y miró hacia los Seis Túmulos cubiertos del verdor de la primavera. Al notar su rubor, Henry extremó aún más la cortesía.

—Sé que te sientes como yo me sentí cuando... ¡Mi pobrecita esposa! Vamos, ten valor. Sólo serán una o dos preguntas y habré terminado contigo. ¿Llevaba tu hermana un anillo de boda?

—No —balbució Margaret.

Hubo un silencio espantoso.

—Henry, en realidad vine para pedirte un favor relacionado con Howards End.

—Cada cosa a su debido tiempo. Ahora me veo obligado a preguntarte el nombre del seductor.

Margaret se levantó y sostuvo la silla a sus espaldas. El color se le había retirado y estaba gris. A Henry no le disgustó que recibiera así la pregunta.

—Tómate todo el tiempo que necesites —le aconsejó—. Y recuerda que es peor para mí que para ti.

Margaret se tambaleó y Henry temió que se fuera a desmayar. Luego le volvió el habla y dijo lentamente:

—¿El seductor? No, no conozco el nombre del que la sedujo.

—¿No te lo ha dicho?

—No le pregunté quién la había seducido —dijo Margaret, rumiando pensativamente aquella odiosa palabra.

—Es curioso —Henry cambió de idea—. Bueno, quizá hiciste bien en no preguntárselo, querida. Pero hasta que no sepamos su nombre, nada podemos hacer. Siéntate. ¡Qué terrible me resulta verte angustiada! Sabía que no estabas preparada para una cosa así. Desearía no haberte llevado conmigo.

Margaret respondió:

—Prefiero estar de pie, si no te importa, porque me gusta la vista de los Seis Túmulos.

—Como prefieras.

—¿Tienes algo más que preguntarme, Henry?

—Sí, tienes que decirme si has podido deducir algo. He sido testigo muchas veces de tu intuición, querida, y desearía que la mía fuera tan certera como la tuya. Tal vez has adivinado algo, aunque tu hermana no lo haya dicho. El menor indicio nos ayudaría.

—¿A quién te refieres al decir «nos ayudaría»?

—Creí conveniente llamar a Charles.

—No era necesario —dijo Margaret acalorándose—. Las noticias le causarán un dolor desproporcionado.

—Se ha ido a ver a tu hermano inmediatamente.

—También eso era innecesario.

—Querida, déjame que te explique cómo está el asunto. No creerás que mi hijo y yo no somos unos caballeros. Actuamos en interés de Helen. Todavía no es demasiado tarde para salvar su nombre.

Margaret golpeó por primera vez.

—¿Vamos a hacer que el seductor se case con ella? —preguntó.

—A ser posible, sí.

—Pero, Henry, supón que él ya está casado. Estos casos ocurren.

—En tal caso, deberá pagar duramente su proceder, un buen castigo que recuerde toda su vida.

Así fue cómo el primer golpe dio en el vacío. Margaret se alegró. ¿Qué le había impulsado a poner en peligro sus existencias? La necedad de Henry los había salvado a ambos. Agotada por la ira, se sentó parpadeando; le explicaba lo que creía conveniente. Al final dijo:

—¿Puedo yo preguntarte algo ahora?

—Claro que sí, querida.

—Mañana Helen se va a Múnich...

—Bueno, posiblemente hace bien.

—Henry, deja terminar de hablar a las damas. Mañana se va; esta noche, con tu permiso, le gustaría dormir en Howards End.

Aquella fue la crisis de su vida. A Margaret le habría gustado recoger sus palabras apenas fueron pronunciadas. No había llegado al punto de proferirlas con suficiente cuidado. Ansiaba prevenirle de que eran más importantes de lo que él suponía. Le vio sopesarlas como si se tratase de una proposición comercial.

—¿Por qué Howards End? —dijo él por fin—. ¿No estaría más cómoda en un hotel como yo propuse?

Margaret se apresuró a darle razones.

—Es una extraña petición, pero ya sabes cómo es Helen, y cómo son las mujeres que se encuentran en su estado —Henry frunció el entrecejo y se agitó irritado—. Tiene la idea que una noche en tu casa le resultaría muy placentera y le haría bien. Yo creo que está en lo cierto. Es una chica imaginativa y la presencia de nuestros libros y nuestros muebles la tranquiliza. Es un hecho. Es el fin de su infancia. Sus últimas palabras fueron: «Un hermoso final.» —Valora todos esos viejos muebles por rabones sentimentales, vaya.

—Exactamente. Veo que lo has comprendido. Es su última oportunidad de estar con ellos.

—No estoy de acuerdo, querida. Helen tendrá la parte que le corresponde de vuestras pertenencias dondequiera que vaya... Posiblemente tendrá más que su parte, porque tú la quieres tanto que le darás cualquier cosa que desee, ¿no es así? Y yo, por mi parte, no tendré el menor inconveniente. Podría entenderlo si fuese su antiguo hogar, porque un hogar, una casa... —cambió la palabra a propósito; había encontrado un argumento definitivo—, porque una casa en la cual uno ha vivido es en cierto modo sagrada. No sé por qué. Por asociación de ideas y todo eso. Ahora bien, Helen no tiene ninguna asociación de 'ideas con Howard End, y en cambio, Charles, Evie y yo sí que las tenemos. No veo por qué quiere pasar la noche allí. Sólo conseguirá coger un resfriado.

—Admitamos que no lo entiendes —gritó Margaret—. Llámalo un capricho. Pero comprende que los caprichos son un hecho científico. Helen es caprichosa y quiere pasar la noche allí.

Entonces Henry la sorprendió con una extraña ocurrencia. Soltó un golpe inesperado.

—Si quiere dormir una noche, luego puede querer dormir dos. Y quizá no podamos sacarla nunca de la casa.

—Bien —dijo Margaret que veía el precipicio ante sus ojos—, supón que no conseguimos sacarla de la casa, ¿qué importaría eso? No haría mal a nadie.

De nuevo el gesto de irritación.

—No, Henry —jadeó batiéndose en retirada—. No quise decir eso. Sólo turbaremos Howards End por esta noche. Mañana la llevaré a Londres...

—¿Y tú tienes intención de dormir también en esa casa húmeda?

—No puedo dejarla sola.

—¡Eso es imposible! ¡Una locura! Tienes que estar aquí cuando llegue Charles.

—Ya te he dicho que me parecía innecesario llamar a Charles, y no tengo el más mínimo deseo de verle.

—Margaret, mi Margaret...

—¿Qué tiene que ver este asunto con Charles? Si a mí me concierne poco, a ti te concierne menos, y a Charles, nada en absoluto.

—Como futuro propietario dé Howards End —dijo míster Wilcox juntando las yemas de los dedos—, yo diría que este asunto concierne a Charles.

—¿En qué sentido? ¿Es que el estado de Helen menosprecia la finca?

—Querida, estás olvidándote de ti misma.

—Creo que fuiste tú quien recomendó hablar sinceramente.

Se miraron sorprendidos. El precipicio estaba justo a sus pies.

—Helen tiene toda mi comprensión —dijo Henry—. Como marido tuyo que soy, haré todo lo que esté en mi mano y no dudo de que Helen ha recibido más mal del que ha hecho. Pero no puedo tratarla como si nada hubiese sucedido. Traicionaría mi posición social si así lo hiciera.

Margaret se controló por última vez.

—No, volvamos a la petición de Helen —dijo—. No es razonable, pero es el ruego de una mujer desgraciada. Mañana se irá a Alemania y no perturbará nunca más a la sociedad. Esta noche pide que se le deje dormir en una casa vacía... una casa que a ti te trae sin cuidado y de la que no te has ocupado durante un año. ¿Puede? ¿Le darás permiso a mi hermana? ¿La perdonarás como tú esperas ser perdonado? ¿Como ya lo has sido, por decirlo todo? Perdónala sólo durante una noche. Eso será suficiente.

—¿Cómo dices?, ¿que yo he sido perdonado?

—No te preocupes ahora de lo que quise decir —dijo Margaret—. Contesta a mi pregunta.

Tal vez algún atisbo de lo que ella quiso decir se abrió paso en su cabeza. Si así fue, lo rechazó. Directamente desde su fortaleza contestó:

—Puedo parecer poco acomodaticio, pero tengo una cierta experiencia de la vida y sé que una cosa lleva a otra. Me temo que será mejor que tu hermana duerma en el hotel. He de tener en cuenta a mis hijos y la memoria de mi esposa. Lo siento, pero procura que abandone mi casa de inmediato.

—Has mencionado a mistress Wilcox.

—¿Perdón?

—Ha sido una rara ocurrencia. A cambio, ¿puedo yo mencionar a mistress Bast?

—Te has estado comportando de un modo extraño todo el día. No pareces la misma —dijo Henry y se levantó de su asiento con el rostro impertérrito.

Margaret corrió hacia él y le tomó las dos manos. Estaba transfigurada.

—¡Ya basta! —gritó—. ¡Tendrás que ver la relación que existe aunque eso te mate, Henry! Tú tuviste una querida... yo te perdoné. Mi hermana tuvo un amante... tú la expulsas de tu casa. ¿Ves la relación? Es estúpido, hipócrita, cruel y despreciable el hombre que ofende a su esposa cuando ella está viva y luego invoca su memoria cuando está muerta. Un hombre que arruina a una mujer por su placer, y luego la rechaza para que vaya a arruinar a otros hombres. Un hombre que da malos consejos financieros y luego niega ser

responsable de las consecuencias. Tú eres todos estos hombres, Henry. No puedes reconocerlos porque no relacionas. Ya estoy harta de tu candidez emponzoñada. Te he consentido demasiado tiempo. Toda tu vida has estado demasiado consentido. Mistress Wilcox te consintió demasiado. Nadie te ha dicho nunca lo que eres. Un caos, un caos criminal. Los hombres como tú utilizan el arrepentimiento como tapadera, así que no te arrepientas. Di sólo para ti mismo: «Lo que Helen ha hecho, lo hice yo también.» —Los dos casos son diferentes —balbució Henry. Su respuesta aún no estaba preparada. Su cerebro era un torbellino y necesitaba ganar tiempo.

—¿En qué sentido son diferentes? Tú traicionaste a mistress Wilcox. Helen sólo se ha traicionado a sí misma. Tú sigues en la sociedad. Helen no puede. Tú sólo obtuviste placer. Helen puede morir. *¿Y* aún tienes la insolencia de hablarme de diferencias, Henry?

¡Oh, la inutilidad de todo aquello! Por fin llegó la respuesta de Henry.

—Percibo que estás intentando un chantaje. No es lo que pudiéramos llamar una bonita arma para que la use una mujer contra su marido. He tenido como norma toda mi vida no prestar atención a las amenazas, y sólo puedo repetirte lo que dije antes: no os doy permiso a ti ni a tu hermana para dormir en Howards End.

Margaret soltó las manos de su marido. Henry entró en la casa restregándoselas con el pañuelo. Durante un rato, Margaret se quedó mirando los Seis Túmulos, tumbas de guerreros, pechos de la primavera. Luego salió a lo que ya era la noche.

CAPÍTULO XXXIX

Charles y Tibby se encontraron en Ducie Street, donde se alojaba este último. Su entrevista fue breve y absurda. No tenían nada en común salvo el idioma, e intentaban expresar por medio de este idioma lo que ninguno de los dos entendía. Charles veía en Helen al enemigo de la familia. La había identificado como «la más peligrosa de las Schlegel» y por encima de su cólera ansiaba contar a su esposa lo bien que había estado. Había tomado una súbita decisión: había que quitar de en medio a aquella chica antes de que les causara más desgracias. Si se presentaba la ocasión, podría casársela con un perdido o, a ser posible, con un tonto. Pero esto era una concesión a la moral y no formaba parte de su esquema central. El desagrado de Charles era sincero, de corazón; el pasado se hilvanaba en su mente con mucha claridad: el odio es un hábil compositor. Como si repasara un diario de a bordo, su memoria recorrió las diversas etapas de la campaña de los Schlegel: la tentativa de comprometer a su hermano, el legado de su madre, la boda de su padre, la introducción del mobiliario y su posterior desembalaje. Aún no se había enterado de la petición de pasar una noche en Howards End; éste iba a ser el golpe de gracia y al mismo tiempo, su gran oportunidad. Pero ya entonces presentía que Howards End era el objetivo y aunque no le gustaba la casa, estaba determinado a defenderla.

Tibby, por otra parte, no tenía opiniones. Vivía más allá de las convenciones. Su hermana tenía derecho a hacer lo que considerase conveniente. No es difícil estar por encima de los convencionalismos cuando no se tienen rehenes entre ellos; los hombres pueden ser menos convencionales que las mujeres y un soltero con medios económicos no encuentra dificultades en este sentido. A diferencia

de Charles, Tibby tenía dinero suficiente; sus antepasados lo habían ganado por él, y si le molestaba la gente que había en un lugar determinado, no tenía más que trasladarse a otro. Era el Ocio sin afecto: una actitud fatal como la energía que lleva consigo: puede producir una cierta forma de cultura fría, pero nunca el arte. Sus hermanas presintiendo el peligro que corría la familia no habían olvidado la existencia del islote de oro que les mantenía a flote sobre el mar. Tibby se atribuía el mérito a sí mismo y despreciaba la lucha y los náufragos.

De ahí lo absurdo de la entrevista; el golfo que los separaba no sólo era espiritual, sino económico. No obstante, se produjeron varios hechos: Charles presionó para que ocurrieran con una impertinencia que el joven estudiante no pudo resistir. ¿En qué fecha se había ido Helen al extranjero? ¿A ver a quién? —Charles estaba deseoso de relacionar el escándalo con Alemania—. Luego, cambiando de táctica, dijo secamente:

—Supongo que te das cuenta de que eres el protector de tu hermana.

—¿En qué sentido?

—Si un hombre se divirtiera con mi hermana, yo le pegaría un balazo, pero tal vez a ti no te importe eso.

—¡Ya lo creo que me importa! —protestó Tibby.

—En ese caso, dime, ¿de quién sospechas? ¡Habla ya, hombre! Siempre se sospecha de alguien.

—De nadie. No, no creo... —involuntariamente enrojeció. Acababa de recordar la escena que se desarrolló en su habitación de Oxford.

—Estás ocultando algo —dijo Charles. A medida que la entrevista avanzaba, Charles iba sacando ventaja a su oponente—. La última vez que la viste, ¿mencionó el nombre de alguien? ¡Sí o no! —tronó de tal modo que Tibby se asustó.

—En mi habitación mencionó a unos amigos. Los Bast, se llamaban...

—¿Quiénes son los Bast?

—Gente... amigos de Helen en la boda de Evie.

—No recuerdo. ¡Pero, por Júpiter, ya recuerdo! Mi tía me contó algo de una gentuza... ¿Qué actitud, qué sentimientos reveló Helen al hablarte de ellos? ¿Los conoces? ¿Los has tratado?

Tibby guardó silencio. Sin proponérselo había traicionado la confianza de su hermana; no estaba lo suficientemente interesado en la vida humana para calibrar adónde irían a parar las cosas, pero tenía un fuerte sentido de la honradez y siempre hasta ese momento había mantenido la palabra dada. Estaba hondamente humillado, no sólo por el daño que había causado a Helen, sino por la debilidad que había descubierto en sí mismo.

—Ya veo, estás conchabado con ellos. Se ven en tus habitaciones. ¡Qué familia! Que Dios proteja a mi pobre padre.

Y Tibby se encontró solo.

CAPÍTULO XL

Leonard, que estaba destinado a figurar extensamente en los periódicos, aquella noche no contaba para nada. La base del árbol estaba en la sombra, porque la luna se ocultaba tras la casa. Por encima, a la derecha, a la izquierda, en el largo prado, la luna brillaba. Leonard no parecía un hombre sino una causa.

Quizá era el modo de amar de Helen, un modo que sorprendía a Margaret, cuya agonía y cuyo desprecio por Henry llevaban grabados la imagen de éste. Helen olvidaba a las personas. Eran cáscaras que guardaban su emoción. Podía compadecerse, sacrificarse o tener instintos, pero ¿había amado alguna vez del modo más noble, cuando el hombre y la mujer, olvidados de sí mismos en el sexo, desean perder el sexo en la camaradería?

Margaret se hacía estas preguntas sin proferir una sola palabra de reproche a su hermana en consideración a los muchos problemas que le reservaba el futuro: la pérdida de los amigos y de los privilegios sociales, la agonía, la suprema agonía de la maternidad, que aún no es objeto de conocimiento común. Por el momento, dejaba que la luna brillase con peculiar fulgor y que las brisas de la primavera soplasen dulcemente, herederas del viento diurno; dejaba que la tierra que trae riqueza, trajera también la paz. Ni siquiera osaba reprobar la actitud de Helen para sus adentros. No podía valorar su desliz por ningún código moral; era todo o no era nada. La moral nos dice que matar es peor que robar, agrupa la mayoría de los pecados en un orden que todo el mundo aprueba, pero todo ello no reza con Helen. Cuanto más claros son los juicios con respecto a algo, tanto más seguros podemos estar de que la moral no entra en juego. Jesucristo era evasivo cuando le

preguntaban. Sólo los que no ven las relaciones que existen entre las cosas se apresuran a tirar la primera piedra.

Aquélla era la noche de Helen; había sido ganada a un precio muy alto y las preocupaciones ajenas no la iban a enturbiar. Margaret no pronunció una palabra sobre su propia tragedia.

—Aislamos —dijo Helen lentamente—. Yo aislé a míster Wilcox de las restantes fuerzas que estaban hundiendo a Leonard. En consecuencia, yo estaba llena de compasión y casi de deseo de venganza. Durante varias semanas había culpado a míster Wilcox y a nadie más. Y así, cuando llegaron tus cartas...

—No debí haberlas escrito —suspiró Margaret—. No sirvieron para proteger a Henry. ¡Qué inútil resulta querer arreglar el pasado, incluso el de los demás!

—Yo no sabía que era idea tuya el expulsar a los Bast.

—Recapacitando, fue un error por mi parte.

—Recapacitando, querida, me doy cuenta de que era lo correcto. Es correcto salvar al hombre a quien se ama. Cada vez soy menos entusiasta de la justicia. Pero tanto él como yo creímos que las habías escrito al dictado. Nos pareció el último detalle, la cúspide de su crueldad. Yo me sentía muy apaleada por entonces... y mistress Bast estaba en su habitación. Yo no la había visto y estuvimos hablando mucho rato Leonard y yo. Yo le humillaba sin motivo. Eso debía haberme puesto sobre aviso de que estaba en peligro. Cuando llegaron las cartas quise ir a pedirte una explicación. Él dijo que adivinaba la explicación: él lo sabía y dijo que tú no debías enterarte. Yo le presioné para que me lo explicara. Me dijo que nadie debía saberlo; era algo relacionado con su mujer. Hasta el final, fuimos míster Bast y miss Schlegel. Yo iba a decirle que tenía que ser sincero conmigo cuando vi sus ojos y comprendí que míster Wilcox le había arruinado en dos sentidos, no en uno. Le atraje hacia mí. Le hice que me lo contara. Yo me sentía muy sola. No debes culparle a él. Él habría continuado adorándome. No quiero volverle a ver, aunque eso suene espantoso. Quise darle dinero y sentirme libre. Oh, Meg, qué poco sabemos de estas cosas.

Apoyó la cara en el árbol.

—Tampoco sabemos de dónde proceden las cosas, cómo nacen y se desarrollan. Las dos veces hubo esta soledad, la noche y el pánico después. ¿Crees que Leonard procede de Paul?

Margaret no habló durante un rato. Estaba tan cansada que su atención se desviaba y quedaba prendida del árbol: los dientes clavados en la corteza con finés medicinales. Desde su observatorio los veía brillar. Había estado intentando contarlos.

—Como consecuencia, es preferible Leonard a la locura —dijo—. Temía que hubieras reaccionado contra Paul hasta perder el juicio.

—Sí, sufrí las consecuencias de la reacción hasta que encontré al pobre Leonard. Ahora estoy serena. Nunca me gustará tu Henry, querida Meg, ni hablaré bien de él, pero aquel odio ciego ha muerto. Ya no me indignaré nunca más contra los Wilcox. Comprendo que te casaras con él y ahora serás muy feliz.

Margaret no respondió.

—Sí —repitió Helen, al tiempo que su voz se hacía más tierna—, por fin comprendo.

—A excepción de mistress Wilcox, querida, nadie entiende nuestros pequeños gestos.

—Porque está muerta... claro, tienes razón.

—No es eso. Siento como si Henry y yo fuéramos fragmentos de la mente de aquella mujer. Ella lo sabe todo, lo es todo, es la casa y el árbol que se inclina sobre ella. Las personas tienen su propia muerte como tienen su propia vida, y aunque no haya nada más allá de la muerte, en nuestra nada seremos distintos los unos de los otros. No puedo creer que una sabiduría como la suya perezca igual que ha de perecer un conocimiento como el mío. Ella conocía la realidad, sabía reconocer cuándo una persona estaba enamorada, aunque no estuviera en la misma habitación. No me cabe duda de que sabía que Henry le engañaba.

—Buenas noches, mistress Wilcox —dijo una voz.

—Ah, buenas noches, miss Avery.

—¿Por qué trabaja para nosotros miss Avery? —murmuró Helen.

—¿Sí, por qué?

Miss Avery cruzó el césped y se confundió con el seto que separaba el jardín de la granja. Una antigua abertura que míster Wilcox había tapado, había reaparecido y los pasos de la anciana sobre el rocío seguían el sendero que míster Wilcox cubriera de césped en su día, cuando adecentó el jardín y lo hizo apto para los juegos.

—Todavía no es nuestra casa —dijo Helen—. Cuando miss Avery nos saludó, sentí que éramos una pareja de turistas.

—Eso lo seremos en todas partes y por siempre.

—Pero turistas afectuosos...

—Pero turistas que fingen que cada hotel es su hogar.

—Yo no puedo fingir mucho tiempo —dijo Helen—. Sentada bajo este árbol resulta fácil olvidar, pero sé que mañana veré alzarse la luna en Alemania. Ni siquiera toda tu bondad puede cambiar los hechos. A menos que vengas conmigo.

Margaret recapacitó un momento. En los últimos años había tomado tanto cariño a Inglaterra que abandonarla le producía un auténtico dolor. Sin embargo, ¿qué le retenía? Sin duda Henry le perdonaría su estallido de ira y continuaría cometiendo brutalidades y alimentando el caos hasta hacerse viejo. Pero ¿de qué serviría el perdón? Más valía desaparecer de la mente de Henry para siempre.

—¿Me lo pides en serio, Helen? ¿Me llevaría bien con Mónica?

—Seguro que no, pero te lo pido en serio.

—Basta, no más planes por ahora. Y basta de reminiscencias.

Hubo un rato de silencio. Era la noche de Helen.

El presente pasaba por ellas como un río. El árbol susurraba. Había producido aquella música antes de que ambas nacieran y continuaría produciéndola después de su muerte, pero su canción era la canción del momento. El momento había pasado. El árbol volvió a susurrar. Sus sentidos estaban agudizados y les pareció que aprehendían la vida. La vida pasada. El árbol susurró una vez más.

—Ahora, a dormir —dijo Margaret.

La paz del campo le invadía, una paz que no tiene comercio con la memoria y poco con la esperanza. Menos aún tiene que ver con las esperanzas de los próximos cinco minutos. Es la paz del

presente, que sobrepasa el entendimiento. Les llegó el murmullo: «ahora», cuando la luz de la luna cayó sobre la espada de su padre. Subieron la escalera, se besaron y en medio de inacabables repeticiones se durmieron. La casa había cubierto de sombra al árbol al principio, pero cuando la luna subió más, los dos se desenlazaron y aparecieron nítidos durante unos instantes en mitad de la noche. Margaret se despertó y contempló el jardín. ¡Qué incomprensible era que Leonard Bast le hubiese arrebatado aquella noche de paz! ¿O formaba parte él también de la mente de mistress Wilcox?

CAPÍTULO XLI

La evolución de Leonard había seguido un curso muy distinto. Los meses que siguieron a Oniton, al margen de los problemas menores que le hubiesen traído, estuvieron dominados por el Remordimiento. Cuando Helen reconsideraba el pasado, podía filosofar o pensar en el futuro y hacer planes para su hijo. Pero el padre no veía nada más allá de su propio pecado. Transcurridas varias semanas, enfrascado en otras ocupaciones, solía gritar de súbito: «Bruto, más que bruto, jamás debí...» y dividirse en dos personas que dialogaban. A veces caía una lluvia sombría que tiznaba los rostros y el firmamento. Hasta Jacky percibió el cambio que se había producido en él. Más terribles aún eran los sufrimientos que le invadían cuando se despertaba. En ciertas ocasiones era feliz al principio, pero poco a poco iba adquiriendo conciencia de un peso que colgaba de él y lastraba sus pensamientos a medida que éstos avanzaban. Diminutas puntas de hierro le quemaban el cuerpo. Una espada le punzaba. Solía sentarse en el borde de la cama, apretándose el corazón y lamentándose: «Oh, ¿qué voy a hacer? ¿Qué puedo hacer?» Nada le producía alivio. No podía poner tierra de por medio entre sí y su infracción, porque ésta crecía en su alma.

El remordimiento no se encuentra entre las virtudes eternas. Los griegos hicieron bien al destronarlo. Su acción es demasiado caprichosa, como las Erinnias que seleccionaban para el castigo a ciertos hombres y ciertos pecados solamente. Y de todos los medios de regeneración, el remordimiento es sin duda el más inútil. Corta los tejidos sanos junto con los enfermos. Es un cuchillo que penetra más profundo que el mal. Leonard fue conducido a través de sus tormentos y emergió purificado, pero débil: un hombre mejor, que

no volvería a perder el control de sí mismo, pero también un hombre menor, que tenía menos que controlar. Tampoco la pureza significaba la paz. El uso del cuchillo puede convertirse en un hábito tan difícil de erradicar como la propia pasión, y Leonard continuaba despertando de sus sueños con un grito.

Construyó una situación que estaba muy lejos de la verdad. Nunca se le ocurrió pensar que Helen era también responsable. Olvidó la intensidad de sus palabras, el encanto que la sinceridad le había conferido a él, la magia de Oniton en la oscuridad, el murmullo del río. Helen amaba lo absoluto. Leonard estaba absolutamente arruinado y aparecía a los ojos de ella como un hombre aparte, aislado del mundo. Un hombre auténtico, que deseaba la aventura y la belleza, que deseaba vivir decentemente y pagar su parte, que podría haber viajado por la vida más gloriosamente que el coche de Juggernaut que le atropellaba. Los recuerdos de la boda de Evie la obnubilaron: los criados almidonados, las montañas de comida desperdiciada, el susurro de las damas engalanadas, los automóviles que goteaban grasa en la grava, mugre en un sendero pretencioso. Helen había degustado el aroma de todo esto a su llegada: en la oscuridad, después del fracaso, estos recuerdos la intoxicaron. Tanto ella como la víctima parecían estar solos en un mundo de irrealidad, y ella le amó absolutamente, quizá durante media hora.

Por la mañana, Helen se había ido. La nota que dejó, tierna e histérica de tono, intencionadamente amable, hirió profundamente a su amante. Se sintió como si hubiera roto una obra de arte, como si hubiera desgarrado de un marco un cuadro de la National Gallery. Cuando Leonard recordaba el talento de Helen y su posición social, se creía un criminal al que cualquiera tiene derecho a pegar un tiro. Tenía miedo de las azafatas y los maleteros en la estación. Tenía miedo, al principio, de su mujer, aunque luego acabaría sintiendo por ella una nueva y extraña ternura y pensando: «No hay ninguna diferencia entre nosotros, a fin de cuentas.»

La expedición a Shropshire convirtió a los Bast en inválidos permanentes. Helen, en su huida, había olvidado pagar la cuenta del hotel y se había llevado los billetes de vuelta; tuvieron que empeñar las pulseras de Jacky para volver a casa. El hundimiento llegó unos días más tarde. Es cierto que Helen le ofreció cinco mil

libras, pero aquella suma de dinero no significaba nada para él. No comprendía que la chica intentaba corregir desesperadamente lo que había hecho, que intentaba salvar algo del desastre, aunque sólo fueran cinco mil libras. Pero de alguna forma tenía él que vivir. Recurrió a la familia y se degradó hasta convertirse en un pedigüeño profesional. Ya no le quedaba nada más que hacer.

«Una carta de Leonard —pensó su hermana Blanche—, después de tanto tiempo.» La escondió para que su marido no la viera y cuando éste se hubo ido al trabajo la leyó con cierta emoción y envió al hermano pródigo un poco de dinero de su asignación doméstica.

—¡Una carta de Leonard! —dijo su otra hermana, Laura, unos días más tarde. La mostró a su marido. Éste escribió una respuesta cruel e insolente, pero le envió más dinero que Blanche, de modo que Leonard le volvió a escribir.

Durante todo el invierno, el sistema se fue perfeccionando. Leonard comprendió que nunca se morirían de hambre, porque eso sería muy doloroso para sus parientes. La sociedad está basada en la familia y el inútil habilidoso puede explotar este hecho indefinidamente. Sin que mediara un sentimiento de generosidad por ninguna de las dos partes, las libras fueron llegando. Los donantes sentían desprecio por Leonard y éste llegó a odiarlos intensamente. Cuando Laura censuraba su matrimonio inmoral, él pensaba con amargura: «Eso es lo que piensa, ¿qué diría si supiera la verdad?» Cuando el marido de Blanche le ofreció trabajo, Leonard encontró un pretexto para rehusar. En Oniton deseaba fervientemente encontrar trabajo, pero la excesiva ansiedad le había deshecho, le había hecho unirse al grupo de los irrecuperables. Cuando su hermano el sacristán dejó de contestar una de sus cartas, le escribió de nuevo diciéndole que él y Jacky irían a verle a su ciudad a pie. No pretendía hacer chantaje, sin embargo, su hermano le envió un giro y aquel truco pasó a formar parte de su sistema. Y así pasaron el invierno y la primavera.

En medio de aquel horror había, con todo, dos puntos de luz. Leonard nunca confundió el pasado. Permanecía vivo, y los que viven son benditos, aunque sólo vivan para un sentimiento de culpabilidad. El sedante de la confusión, que tantos hombres utilizan

para emborronar y ocultar sus errores, nunca pasó por los labios de Leonard.

Y si bebo el olvido de un día
en tal medida acorto el tamaño de mi alma.

Es una máxima dura y un hombre duro la escribió, pero es algo que yace en la raíz de todo carácter.

El otro punto de luz era su ternura por Jacky. Ahora la compadecía con nobleza, no con la despectiva compasión del hombre que permanece junto a una mujer en la bonanza y en la adversidad. Intentó ser menos irritable. Se preguntaba qué era lo que deseaban los ojos hambrientos de Jacky: nada que ella pudiera expresar o que él u otro hombre pudieran darle. ¿Recibiría Jacky alguna vez esa justicia que es la benevolencia, esa justicia para los subproductos que la sociedad está demasiado ocupada para otorgar? A Jacky le gustaban las flores, era generosa con el dinero y no era rencorosa. Si le hubiera dado un hijo, Leonard la habría estimado. De no haber estado casados, Leonard jamás habría mendigado; habría ido disolviéndose y habría muerto. Pero la vida es un embrollo: tenía que velar por Jacky y descendió por los senderos de la suciedad para que ella tuviera las plumas y los platos de comida que necesitaba.

Una vez vio a Margaret y a su hermano. Fue en Saint Paul. Había entrado en la catedral en parte para evitar la lluvia y en parte para admirar un cuadro que otrora le había inspirado. Pero la luz era deficiente, el cuadro estaba mal emplazado, el Tiempo y el Juicio se habían adueñado de Leonard por entonces. Sólo la muerte le atraía, con su regazo de amapolas en el que todos los hombres irán a dormir. Echó una ojeada y dio media vuelta sin rumbo en busca de una silla. Entonces, al fondo de la nave, vio a miss Schlegel y a su hermano, de pie en mitad del pasillo. Sus rostros reflejaban una extrema gravedad. No le cupo duda de que estaban preocupados por su hermana.

Una vez fuera —pues huyó inmediatamente— deseó haberles hablado. ¿Qué era su vida? ¿Qué representaban para él unas pocas

palabras de reproche o incluso la cárcel? Había cometido una falta: ese era el verdadero terror. Supieran lo que supiesen, él les contaría todo lo que sabía. Volvió a entrar en Saint Paul, pero los Schlegel se habían ido en su ausencia. Se habían ido a exponer sus dificultades ante míster Wilcox y Charles.

La vista de Margaret desvió el remordimiento hacia nuevos cauces. Deseaba confesarse y aunque ese deseo es señal de naturaleza débil que está a punto de perder la esencia de la relación humana, no tomó una forma innoble. No suponía que la confesión le devolvería la felicidad. Era más bien un ansia de verse libre de aquel enredo. Esa es también el ansia del suicida. Los impulsos son similares y el crimen del suicida radica únicamente en su desconsideración por los sentimientos de los que deja tras de sí. La confesión no hace daño a nadie —eso está probado— y, por extraña que resulte a los ingleses y a los principios de la iglesia anglicana, Leonard tenía perfecto derecho a hacer lo que le pareciera.

Además, tenía confianza en Margaret. Ahora necesitaba de la dureza de que ella había dado muestras. Su natural frío, cerebral, sería justo, aunque antipático. Haría lo que ella le dijera, aunque tuviera que ver a Helen. Aquel era el máximo castigo que podía imponerle. Y quizá le dijera cómo estaba Helen. Esa sería la suprema recompensa.

No sabía nada de Margaret, ni siquiera si se había casado con míster Wilcox, y seguirle la pista le llevó varios días. Esa misma noche se dirigió entre la humedad reinante a Wickham Place, donde aparecían unos bloques de pisos nuevos. ¿Era también él la causa de la mudanza? ¿Habían sido expulsados de la sociedad los Schlegel por culpa suya? De ahí se fue a una biblioteca pública, pero no pudo encontrar en el directorio ningún Schlegel que respondiera a los datos que él sabía. Por la mañana siguió investigando. Merodeó en la puerta de la oficina de míster Wilcox y cuando salieron los empleados les fue diciendo: «Perdone, señor, ¿su jefe está casado?» Muchos le miraron con asombro, alguno le dijo: «¿Y eso a usted qué le importa?», pero uno que aún no había adquirido la reticencia propia del oficinista le contó lo que él quería saber. Leonard no pudo enterarse de la dirección particular. Eso requirió invertir más angustias en directorios y metros. Ducie Street no fue descubierta

hasta el lunes, el día en que Margaret y su marido se fueron a la expedición de caza a Howards End.

Llamó a la puerta a eso de las cuatro de la tarde. El tiempo había cambiado y el sol brillaba alegremente en los escalones adornados con triángulos de mármol blancos y negros. Leonard bajó los ojos hacia ellos después de llamar al timbre. Se sentía en un curioso estado: le parecía que se abrían y se cerraban puertas dentro de su cuerpo y se había visto obligado a dormir sentado en la cama, con la espalda apoyada contra la pared. Cuando una doncella acudió, no pudo verle la cara: la lluvia umbría descendió súbitamente.

—¿Vive aquí mistress Wilcox? —preguntó.

—Ha salido —fue la respuesta.

—¿Cuándo volverá?

—Voy a preguntar —dijo la doncella.

Margaret había dado instrucciones de no rechazar a nadie que mencionase su nombre. Poniendo la cadena en la puerta, pues así lo exigía la apariencia de Leonard, la doncella se dirigió al salón, a la sazón ocupado por Tibby. Tibby estaba durmiendo. Había comido mucho. Charles Wilcox aún no había aparecido para sostener la amarga entrevista. Contestó adormilado:

—No sé. En Hilton. En Howards End. ¿Quién es?

—Se lo preguntaré, señor.

—No, no se moleste.

—Se ha ido en coche a Howards End —dijo la doncella a Leonard.

Le dio las gracias y le preguntó dónde estaba ese lugar.

—Parece que quiere usted saber mucho —recalcó la doncella. Pero Margaret le había prohibido comportarse de un modo misterioso, así que le dijo, contra su criterio, que Howards End estaba en Hertfordshire.

—Dígame, por favor, ¿es un pueblo?

—¡Un pueblo! No, es la casa particular de míster Wilcox o, al menos, una de sus casas. Mistress Wilcox guarda allá sus enseres.

Hilton es el pueblo.

—Ah, y ¿cuándo estarán de vuelta?

—Míster Schlegel no lo sabe. No podemos saberlo todo, ¿no le parece? —cerró la puerta dejándolo fuera y acudió a atender al teléfono que sonaba furiosamente.

Leonard vagó a lo largo de otra noche de agonía. La confesión se hacía cada vez más difícil. Tan pronto como le fue posible, se metió en la cama. Contempló cómo un reflejo de la luna cruzaba el suelo de su dormitorio y, como suele suceder cuando la mente está sobrecargada, se quedó dormido para el resto de la pieza pero continuó despierto para ese fragmento de luna. ¡Horrible!, empezó uno de sus diálogos consigo mismo. Parte de él decía: —¿Por qué horrible? Es la luz de la luna. —Sí, pero se mueve. —La luna también. —Es un puño cerrado. —¿Y por qué no? —Es que me va a tocar. —Déjalo. Y, como si hubiera adquirido movimiento, el reflejo se subió a la manta. En aquel momento apareció una serpiente azul, luego otra, paralela a la anterior. —¿Hay vida en la luna? —Por supuesto. —Yo creía que estaba deshabitada. —No por el tiempo, la muerte, el juicio y las serpientes menores. —¡Las serpientes menores!, dijo Leonard indignado en voz alta. «Menuda idea.» Por un supremo esfuerzo de voluntad, se despertó para el resto de la habitación. Gradualmente, Jacky, su cama, su comida, sus ropas en la silla, pasaron a formar parte de su consciente. Y el horror se desvaneció como un anillo que se expande en el agua.

—Oye, Jacky, me voy un rato.

Jacky respiraba con regularidad. El reflejo de luna se destacaba claramente sobre la manta a rayas y empezó a cubrir el chal que tapaba los pies de Jacky. ¿Por qué se había asustado? Fue hasta la ventana y vio que la luna descendía en un cielo despejado. Vio sus volcanes y las manchas brillantes que por un gracioso error se llaman mares. Empalidecían porque el sol que los había iluminado se aproximaba para iluminar la tierra. El mar de la Serenidad, el mar de la Tranquilidad, el océano de las Tormentas Lunares se fundían en una sola mancha luciente que, a su vez, se deslizaba hacia la sempiterna aurora. ¡Y él se había asustado de la luna!

Se vistió entre las luces en pugna y buscó su dinero. Estaba escaseando nuevamente, pero había lo suficiente para un billete de

ida y vuelta a Hilton. Al sonido del dinero, Jacky abrió los ojos.

—Hola, Len. ¿Qué hay?

—¡Qué hay, Jacky! Hasta luego.

Jacky se dio media vuelta y se durmió. La casa no estaba cerrada con llave, pues el propietario era un mayorista del Covent Garden. Leonard salió a la calle y caminó hacia la estación. El tren, aunque no salía hasta dentro de una hora, estaba ya formado al extremo del andén, y Leonard se dejó caer en el asiento y se durmió. Al primer traqueteo, ya estaban a plena luz del día Habían dejado atrás las puertas férreas de King's Cross y avanzaban bajo el cielo azul. Siguieron unos túneles en cuyos intervalos abiertos, el cielo se volvía más y más azul, y a partir del muelle de Finsbury Park, Leonard tuvo la primera visión del sol. Parecía rodar tras los humos de levante como una rueda cuya pareja fuera la luna descendente, y, sin embargo, daba la impresión de ser el sirviente del cielo azul y no su señor. Leonard dormitó otra vez. Sobre Tewin Water era de día. A la izquierda caía la sombra del muelle y sus arcadas; a la derecha, Leonard vio los árboles de Tewin y la iglesia con su salvaje leyenda de inmortalidad. Seis árboles silvestres —ese era un hecho— crecían en una de las tumbas del cementerio de Tewin. La ocupante de la tumba —así dice la leyenda— es una atea que declaró que si Dios existía, crecerían seis árboles sobre su tumba. Eso sucedía en Hertfordshire; y más allá, en el campo, estaba la casa de un ermitaño —mistress Wilcox lo había conocido— que se enclaustró, escribió profecías y dio cuanto tenía a los pobres. Mientras, en medio, salpicadas allí y allá, estaban las villas de los hombres de negocios que veían la vida de un modo más firme, aunque con la firmeza del que tiene los ojos entornados. Sobre todo aquello brillaba el sol. Los pájaros cantaban para todos, las primaveras eran amarillas para todos y las becalungas azules y el campo, sin importarle la interpretación que cada cual le diera, estaba profiriendo su grito de «¡Ahora!» No obstante, aquello no liberó a Leonard y el cuchillo se hundió más profundamente en su corazón cuando el tren se detuvo en Hilton. Pero el remordimiento se había vuelto hermoso.

Hilton estaba dormido o, a lo sumo, desayunando. Leonard notó el contraste cuando abandonó el pueblo y se adentró en el campo. Allí los hombres estaban en pie desde el alba. Sus horas venían

regidas no por la hora oficial de Londres, sino por los movimientos de las cosechas y del sol. Sólo un sentimental diría que son hombres de un temple más fino. Pero el hecho es que siguen fieles a la vida de la luz del día. Son la esperanza de Inglaterra. Desmañadamente transportan la antorcha del sol hasta el momento en que la nación esté preparada para tomarla. Mitad gaznápiros, mitad producto petulante de escuela rural, todavía pueden dar una raza superior y procrear verdaderos granjeros.

Al pasar junto al pozo de cal, un automóvil le adelantó. En él iba otro tipo de hombre a quien la naturaleza favorece: el imperialista. Saludable, incluso en movimiento, tiene la esperanza de heredar la tierra. Se reproduce tan rápidamente como los granjeros, y con la misma solidez. La tentación de aclamarle como a un supergranjero, que porta las virtudes del país allende los mares es fuerte. Pero el imperialista no es lo que cree o lo que parece. Es un destructor. Prepara el camino para el cosmopolita, ya aunque sus ambiciones se vean colmadas, la tierra que herede será gris.

Leonard, sofocado por su propio pecado, albergaba la convicción de que una innata bondad reinaba por doquier. No se trataba del optimismo que le habían enseñado en el colegio. Una y otra vez han de sonar los tambores y los duendes pasearse por el universo antes de que la alegría se vea desprovista de su apariencia de superficialidad. El optimismo era casi paradójico y emanaba de su propia tristeza. La Muerte destruye al hombre, pero la idea de la Muerte le salva: esto era lo más exacto que se había dicho hasta entonces. La Miseria y la Tragedia pueden despertar todo lo grande que hay en nosotros y reforzar las alas del amor. Pueden, sí, pero no es seguro que lo hagan, porque no son servidores del amor. Pero pueden despertar, y el conocimiento de esta increíble verdad le reconfortaba.

A medida que se aproximaba a la casa, todos sus pensamientos se detuvieron. Ideas contradictorias se alineaban unas junto a otras en su cabeza. Estaba aterrorizado, pero feliz; avergonzado, pero limpio de culpa. Sabía de memoria cuál sería su confesión: «Mistress Wilcox, he hecho mal.» Pero el sol le había robado su significado y se sintió más bien transportado a una suprema aventura.

Entró en el jardín, se reanimó junto a un coche que encontró en él, vio una puerta abierta y penetró en la casa. Sí, sería muy fácil.

Oyó voces procedentes de una habitación situada a su izquierda; la de Margaret estaba entre ellas. Oyó pronunciar su propio nombre en voz alta y un hombre a quien jamás había visto, dijo:

—Ah, de modo que está aquí. No me sorprende. Voy a darle la lección que se merece.

—Mistress Wilcox —dijo Leonard—, he hecho mal.

El hombre lo agarró por el cuello y gritó:

—¡Traedme un palo!

Las mujeres chillaban. Un palo muy brillante descendió e hirió a Leonard, no donde le había alcanzado el golpe, sino en el corazón. Los libros cayeron sobre él en cascada. Nada tenía sentido.

—Traed agua —ordenó Charles, que no había perdido la calma ni un instante—. Está fingiendo, naturalmente, yo sólo utilicé la hoja. Vamos, sáquenlo al aire.

Margaret, creyendo que Charles sabía lo que decía, le obedeció. Acostaron a Leonard, que estaba muerto, en la grava. Helen le echó un chorro de agua.

—Ya basta —dijo Charles.

—Sí, con un asesinato ya basta —dijo miss Avery saliendo de la casa con la espada.

CAPÍTULO XLII

Cuando Charles abandonó Ducie Street, tomó el primer tren para su casa, pero no se enteró de los últimos acontecimientos hasta entrada la noche. Entonces su padre, que había cenado solo, le hizo llamar y en tono grave le preguntó por Margaret.

—No sé dónde está, padre —dijo Charles—. Dolly le estuvo guardando la cena casi una hora.

—Avísame cuando venga.

Pasó otra hora. Los criados se retiraron a dormir y Charles hizo otra visita a su padre para recibir nuevas instrucciones. Mistress Wilcox aún no había regresado.

—Me sentaré a esperarla todo el tiempo que tú quieras, pero no es probable que venga. ¿No se habrá quedado con su hermana en el hotel?

—Tal vez —dijo míster Wilcox pensativamente— ...tal vez.

—¿Puedo hacer algo por usted?

—Esta noche no, hijo mío.

A míster Wilcox le gustaba que le tratasen de usted. Alzó los ojos y dirigió a su hijo una mirada de ternura más abierta de lo que normalmente le concedía. Vio a Charles como si fuera aún un niño y como un hombre hecho y derecho al mismo tiempo. Su mujer se había revelado inestable, pero le quedaban sus hijos.

Pasada la medianoche, llamó a la puerta de Charles. «No puedo dormir —dijo—, más vale que demos un paseo y acabemos con todo esto.» Se quejó del calor. Charles le llevó al jardín y ambos pasearon arriba y abajo enfundados en sus batas. Charles se iba

calmando a medida que la historia se desarrollaba; desde mucho antes se había dado cuenta de que Margaret era tan mala como su hermana.

—Por la mañana pensará de otra manera —dijo míster Wilcox, que, por supuesto, no había dicho nada de mistress Bast—. Pero no puedo permitir que estas cosas continúen ocurriendo impunemente. Estoy moralmente cierto de que está con su hermana en Howards End. La casa es mía y algún día será tuya, Charles, y cuando yo digo que nadie viva en ella, quiero decir que nadie viva en ella. No lo consentiré —miró a la luna con enfado—. En mi opinión, esta cuestión está relacionada con algo mucho más importante: con el derecho de propiedad en sí mismo.

—Sin duda —dijo Charles.

Míster Wilcox enlazó su brazo con el de su hijo, pero algo en éste le fue gustando menos a medida que le iba contando más.

—No quiero que saques la conclusión de que mi mujer y yo hemos tenido algo parecido a una pelea. Ella estaba abrumada por los problemas, como lo estaría cualquiera. Haré lo que pueda por Helen, pero en el bien entendido de que deben abandonar la casa de inmediato. ¿Está claro? Es una *conditio sine qua non.*

—¿Quieres que vaya yo mañana por la mañana en el coche, a las ocho?

—A las ocho o antes. Diles que actúas en representación mía y, por supuesto, no emplees la violencia, Charles.

Por la mañana, cuando Charles regresó dejando a Leonard muerto en la grava, no le parecía que hubiese empleado la violencia. La muerte se había producido a consecuencia de un ataque de corazón. Su propia madrastra lo había dicho e incluso miss Avery había reconocido que sólo había utilizado la parte plana de la espada. A su paso por el pueblo informó a la policía, que le dio las gracias y le dijo que habría una encuesta judicial. Encontró a su padre en el jardín, ocultando sus ojos del sol.

—Ha sido horrible —dijo Charles con gravedad—. Estaban allí, efectivamente, y el hombre en cuestión estaba con ellas.

—¿Quién?, ¿qué hombre?

—Te lo dije ayer por la noche. Su nombre es Bast.

—¡Dios mío! ¿Es posible? —dijo míster Wilcox—. ¡En casa de tu madre, Charles! ¡En la propia casa de tu madre!

—Lo sé, padre. Eso fue lo que sentí. A decir verdad, ya no hay por qué preocuparse por el hombre. Estaba dando las últimas boqueadas a causa de una enfermedad de corazón y antes de que pudiera demostrarle lo que pensaba de él, expiró. La policía está estudiando el caso en estos momentos.

Míster Wilcox escuchaba atentamente.

—Me presenté allí... no serían más de las siete y media. Miss Avery estaba encendiéndoles el fuego. Ellas aún estaban en el piso de arriba. Yo esperé en el salón. Todos estuvimos muy corteses y serenos, aunque yo tenía ya mis sospechas. Les di un recado y mistress Wilcox dijo: «Ah, sí, ya veo. Sí», con ese tono suyo.

—¿Nada más?

—Le prometí decirte, «con todo su amor», que se iba a Alemania con su hermana esta misma tarde. Eso fue todo lo que tuvo tiempo de decirme.

Míster Wilcox pareció aliviado.

—Por entonces supongo que el hombre se cansó de estar escondido pues, de pronto, mistress Wilcox gritó su nombre. Le reconocía y fui a su encuentro en el vestíbulo. ¿No hice bien, padre? Me pareció que las cosas habían llegado un poco lejos.

—¿Si hiciste bien, hijo mío? No lo sé. Pero no serías mi hijo si no te hubieras comportado como lo has hecho. ¿Entonces él se... se hundió, como tú dices? —retrocedía ante la simple palabra.

—Se agarró a la librería, que se cayó sobre él. Así que yo me limité a poner la espada en el suelo y lo llevé al jardín. Todos pensamos que estaba fingiendo. No obstante, está muerto. ¡Un feo asunto!

—¿La espada? —gritó su padre con angustia en la voz—. ¿Qué espada? ¿La espada de quién?

—Una espada de ellas.

—¿Y qué hacías tú con esa espada?

—Bueno, papá, compréndelo, tenía que agarrar lo primero que me viniese a las manos. No tenía una fusta o un palo. Le pegué una

o dos veces en los hombros con la parte plana de la vieja espada alemana de ellas.

—¿Y luego, qué pasó?

—Se le cayó encima la librería, como ya te dije, y rodó por el suelo —dijo Charles con un suspiro. No era divertido dar rodeos ante su padre, que nunca parecía satisfecho con las explicaciones.

—¿Pero la causa real de su muerte fue una enfermedad de corazón? ¿Estás seguro?

—Una enfermedad o un ataque. Sin embargo, ya nos enteraremos de sobra en la encuesta de estos pormenores tan desagradables.

Entraron a desayunar. Charles tenía un dolor de cabeza atroz, consecuencia de haber conducido en ayunas. Estaba asimismo preocupado por el futuro, previendo que la policía detendría a Helen y a Margaret para la encuesta y saldrían a relucir los trapos sucios. Se vio a sí mismo obligado a abandonar Hilton. No podrían vivir cerca del escenario del escándalo: no sería justo para con su propia esposa. Le aliviaba pensar que los ojos de su padre estaban por fin abiertos. Habría un terrible ajetreo y probablemente una separación de Margaret; luego empezarían de nuevo, como habían vivido en tiempos de su madre.

—Creo que me llegaré a la comisaría dando una vuelta —dijo su padre cuando hubieron acabado de desayunar.

—¿Para qué? —gritó Dolly a quien todavía no habían «puesto al corriente».

—Bien. ¿Qué coche tomarás?

—Creo que iré paseando.

—Hay su buena media milla —dijo Charles dirigiéndose al jardín —. El sol es muy fuerte para estar en abril. ¿No prefieres que te lleve y demos una vueltecita por los alrededores de Tewin?

—Continúas comportándote como si yo no supiera lo que quiero —dijo míster Wilcox con irritación. Charles cerró la boca—. Vosotros los jóvenes tenéis la obsesión del coche. Ya te lo he dicho, quiero caminar: me encantan los paseos.

—Está bien; estaré en la casa por si me necesitas para algo. Pensaba no ir hoy a la oficina, salvo que opines lo contrario.

—Quédate, hijo —dijo míster Wilcox poniendo una mano en el antebrazo de Charles.

A Charles no le gustó aquello; se sentía incómodo con su padre, que no parecía ser el mismo aquella mañana. Había en él un toque de petulancia casi femenino. ¿Sería que se estaba haciendo viejo? A los Wilcox no les faltaba la afectividad. Por el contrario, la tenían en grado sumo, pero no sabían cómo exteriorizarla. Era una afectividad en pañales y Charles, para ser un hombre de corazón cálido, había transmitido muy poca alegría. Contemplando a su padre arrastrar los pies por el camino, sintió un vago pesar —un deseo de que algo hubiese sido distinto de algún modo—, un deseo —aunque no lo expresó así— de que le hubieran enseñado a decir «YO» en su juventud. Deseaba compensar la traición de Margaret, pero sabía que su padre había sido muy feliz hasta el día anterior. ¿Cómo lo había conseguido aquella mujer? Por medio de algún truco deshonesto, sin duda, pero ¿cuál?

Míster Wilcox reapareció a las once con aspecto cansado. Al día siguiente tendría lugar la encuesta sobre la muerte de Leonard y la policía requería la presencia de su hijo.

—Ya lo esperaba —dijo Charles—. Naturalmente, seré el testigo principal.

CAPÍTULO XLIII

Del torbellino y el horror que habían empezado con la enfermedad de la tía Juley y que no iban a terminar ni siquiera con la muerte de Leonard le parecía imposible a Margaret que pudiera surgir una vida saludable. Los acontecimientos se sucedían en una línea lógica aunque insensata. Las personas habían perdido su humanidad y adquirían un valor tan arbitrario como si lo eligieran de un mazo de cartas. Era natural que Henry hiciera tal cosa y fuera la causa de que Helen hiciera tal otra para considerarla luego culpable de haberla hecho; era natural que Leonard quisiera saber cómo estaba Helen y que viniera y que Charles se irritara con él por haber venido... era natural, pero irreal. En aquel embrollo de causas y efecto, ¿qué había sido de sus auténticas identidades? Ahora Leonard yacía en el jardín, muerto de causas naturales; sin embargo, la vida era un río profundo, profundo, y la muerte un cielo azul; la vida era una casa, la muerte, una brizna de heno, una flor, una torre; la vida y la muerte eran cualquier cosa y todas a la vez, excepto esta insensatez ordenada donde el rey mata a la reina y el as al rey. Ah, no, existe la belleza y la aventura detrás de todo esto, tal como había clamado el hombre que ahora yacía a sus pies; había esperanza a este lado de la tumba; había relaciones auténticas más allá de los límites que nos refrenan. Como el prisionero que levanta la vista y ve la llamada de las estrellas, así Margaret desde el remolino y el horror de aquellos días captaba atisbos de un mecanismo divino.

Y Helen, muda de terror, pero intentando conservar la calma por su hijo, y miss Avery, tranquila, pero murmurando dulcemente: «Nadie le dijo jamás a este muchacho que iba a tener un hijo...» También le recordaban que el horror no es el final. Margaret no

sabía a qué última armonía tendemos. Le parecía importante, sin embargo, que un niño naciera para apropiarse de las grandes oportunidades de belleza y aventura que el mundo ofrece. Deambuló por el soleado jardín recogiendo narcisos blancos de corazón escarlata. No había otra cosa que hacer; el momento de los telegramas y la ira había pasado. Ahora lo aconsejable era que las manos de Leonard estuvieran dobladas sobre su pecho y llenas de flores. Allí reposaba el padre; mejor dejarlo así. Mejor dejar que la Miseria se convirtiera en Tragedia, cuyos ojos son las estrellas y en cuyas manos están el ocaso y la aurora.

Ni siquiera la influencia de los representantes de la autoridad, ni siquiera la vuelta del doctor, vulgar y agudo, hicieron tambalear su creencia en la eternidad y en la belleza. La ciencia explica al hombre, pero no lo puede entender. Tras largos siglos entre huesos y músculos, la ciencia puede haber avanzado en el conocimiento de los nervios, pero esto no le proporciona comprensión. Se puede abrir el corazón ante míster Mansbridge y los demás de su especie sin que descubran sus secretos, porque ellos lo quieren todo en blanco y negro y eso es exactamente lo que obtienen.

Interrogaron detenidamente a Margaret sobre Charles. Ella no sospechaba por qué. La muerte había hecho su aparición y el médico estaba de acuerdo en que se debía a una enfermedad de corazón. Le pidieron que les dejara ver la espada de su padre. Margaret les explicó que la ira de Charles era natural, aunque equivocada. A esto siguieron una serie de penosas preguntas sobre Leonard, a todas las cuales respondió Margaret sin vacilaciones. Luego volvieron sobre Charles.

—Sin duda míster Wilcox puede haber precipitado su muerte —dijo Margaret—, pero si no hubiera sido una cosa, habría sido otra, como ustedes bien saben.

Al final le dieron las gracias y se llevaron la espada y el cadáver a Hilton. Margaret empezó a recoger los libros del suelo.

Helen se había ido a la granja. Era el lugar más adecuado para ella, dado que tenía que quedarse hasta el término de la encuesta. Como si las cosas no fueran ya bastante duras, Madge y su marido pusieron reparos: no veían por qué tenían que recoger los desechos de Howards End. Y, desde luego, no les faltaba razón. Todo el mundo

iba a tener razón y a vengarse ampliamente de las valerosas conversaciones contra los convencionalismos sociales. «Nada importa —habían dicho las Schlegel en el pasado—, excepto el propio respeto y el de los amigos.» Cuando llegó el momento, otras cosas importaban, terriblemente. No obstante, Madge había cedido y Helen tuvo la paz asegurada por un día y una noche. Al día siguiente volvería a Alemania.

En cuanto a Margaret, estaba decidida a marcharse también. No había llegado ningún mensaje de Henry; quizá esperaba que ella se disculpase. Ahora que Margaret tenía tiempo de meditar sobre su propia tragedia, no estaba arrepentida. No le perdonaba a Henry su comportamiento, no quería perdonarle. El discurso que le había hecho le parecía perfecto, no cambiaría una sola palabra. Había que pronunciarlo una vez en la vida para ajustar la desnivelación del mundo. No fue un discurso dirigido únicamente a su marido, sino a miles de hombres como él: era una protesta contra la oscuridad interior que reina en las altas esferas, contra la oscuridad de esta era comercial. Aunque su marido rehiciera su vida sin ella, Margaret no podía disculparle. Henry había rehusado conectar en la ocasión más clara que puede planteársele a un hombre, y su amor debía pagar las consecuencias.

No, no había nada más que hacer. Había intentado no abocarse al precipicio, pero quizá la caída era inevitable. Y a Margaret le consolaba pensar que el futuro era inevitable: causas y efectos seguirían enlazándose hacia algún objetivo indudable, imposible de imaginar por ahora. En ocasión como la presente, el alma se retira hacia dentro, se repliega sobre sí misma, para flotar en el cauce de una corriente más profunda, se comunica con los muertos y ve la gloria de este mundo, no disminuida, pero distinta a lo que otrora supusiera. Modifica el enfoque hasta que las cosas triviales desaparecen. Margaret había intentado este camino durante todo el invierno. La muerte de Leonard le había hecho llegar hasta el final. Era una lástima que Henry, ¡ay!, tuviera que desvanecerse mientras surgía la realidad y que sólo quedara claro su amor por él, grabado con su imagen como los camafeos que rescatamos de los sueños.

Con ojo firme, Margaret trazó el futuro de su marido. Pronto volvería a presentar al mundo un rostro saludable, ¿y qué le importaba a él o al mundo que el meollo estuviera podrido? Se iría

volviendo un viejo rico y venerable, a veces un poco sentimental con respecto a las mujeres, pero dispuesto siempre a tomar una copa con cualquiera. Tenaz en el poder, conservaría a Charles y a los demás bajo su dependencia y se retiraría de los negocios de mala gana y a una edad avanzada. Acabaría por asentarse, aunque eso Margaret no podía imaginárselo. Para ella, Henry estaría siempre en movimiento y haría que los demás lo estuvieran también mientras la tierra diera vueltas. Pero, llegado el momento, se sentiría cansado de moverse y de asentarse. Y luego, ¿qué? La inevitable palabra. Entregar el alma a su correspondiente cielo.

¿Se encontrarían en ese cielo? Margaret siempre había creído que para ella existía la inmortalidad. Siempre le había parecido natural un futuro eterno. Y Henry creía en su propia inmortalidad. Con todo, ¿volverían a encontrarse? ¿No habrá más bien infinitos desniveles más allá de la muerte, como enseña la teoría que él había censurado en cierta ocasión? Y el nivel de Henry, superior o inferior, ¿sería el mismo que el de ella?

Así se hallaba, meditando gravemente, cuando Henry le mandó llamar. Envió a Crane en su coche. Otros criados habían pasado como el agua, pero el chófer continuaba, a pesar de su impertinencia y su deslealtad. A Margaret no le gustaba Crane y él lo sabía.

—¿Son las llaves lo que desea míster Wilcox? —preguntó Margaret.

—No lo dijo, señora.

—¿No trae usted ninguna nota para mí?

—El señor no me dijo nada, señora.

Tras reflexionar unos instantes, cerró Howards End. Era penoso contemplar aquel calor que se extinguía para siempre. Apagó el fuego que ardía en la cocina y esparció las brasas en el patio embaldosado. Cerró las ventanas y echó las cortinas. Probablemente Henry vendería la casa.

Estaba decidida a no perdonarle nada, porque no había ocurrido nada nuevo en lo que a ellos concernía. Su estado de ánimo no tenía por qué haber cambiado desde el día anterior. Henry la esperaba de pie, un poco alejado de la puerta de entrada de la casa

de Charles e hizo detenerse al coche con un gesto. Cuando su mujer bajó, dijo con voz ronca:

—Prefiero discutir las cosas contigo fuera.

—Me temo que será más apropiado discutirlas en la carretera —dijo Margaret—. ¿Recibiste mi mensaje?

—¿Sobre qué?

—Me voy a Alemania con mi hermana. Tengo que comunicarte que a partir de ahora aquél será mi domicilio permanente. Nuestra conversación de ayer por la noche fue más importante de lo que tú crees. No me siento capaz de perdonarte y te dejo.

—Estoy sumamente cansado —dijo Henry en tono herido—. He estado caminando toda la mañana y desearía sentarme.

—Muy bien, si no te importa sentarte en el césped...

Antaño la carretera del Norte debía haber estado bordeada de glebas a todo lo largo, pero los hombres como Henry las habían robado. Margaret avanzó hasta un fragmento situado enfrente, de modo que no pudieran ser vistos por Charles o por Dolly.

—Aquí están tus llaves —dijo Margaret. Se las lanzó a Henry. Las llaves cayeron en el declive de hierba y él no las recogió.

—Tengo algo que decirte —dijo él amablemente.

Margaret conocía aquella amabilidad superficial, aquella confesión improvisada, destinada tan sólo a provocar admiración por el hombre.

—No quiero oírlo —respondió Margaret—. Mi hermana va a sufrir y a partir de ahora voy a vivir con ella. Vamos a intentar construir algo ella, su hijo y yo.

—¿Adónde te vas a ir?

—A Múnich. Nos vamos una vez acabe la encuesta, si Helen no se encuentra muy mal.

—¿Después de la encuesta?

—Sí.

—¿Te das cuenta de cuál será el veredicto de la encuesta?

—Sí: enfermedad de corazón.

—No, querida: homicidio involuntario.

Margaret hundió los dedos en la hierba. El promontorio sobre el que se hallaba pareció moverse como si estuviera vivo.

—Homicidio involuntario —repitió míster Wilcox—. Charles puede ser condenado a prisión. No me atrevo a decírselo. No sé qué hacer, no sé qué hacer. Estoy deshecho, acabado...

No se elevó en Margaret una súbita llama. No comprendía que la destrucción de Henry era su única esperanza. No acogió al doliente en sus brazos. Pero a partir de aquel día, empezó una nueva vida. El veredicto fue emitido y Charles procesado. No había razón alguna para condenarle, pero la ley, hecha a su imagen, le sentenció a tres años de prisión. La fortaleza de Henry se desmoronó. No soportaba a nadie más que a su esposa, se arrastró hasta Margaret y le pidió que hiciera con él lo que pudiera. Y Margaret hizo lo que le pareció más sencillo: lo llevó a recuperarse a Howards End.

CAPÍTULO XLIV

El padre de Tom estaba segando el prado. Pasaba y repasaba la guadaña entre el zumbido de las cuchillas y los dulces olores del césped, dando vueltas en círculos cada vez más reducidos en torno al centro sagrado del campo. Tom negociaba con Helen.

—No tengo la menor idea —respondía Helen—. Quizá el niño lo sepa, ¿no crees, Meg?

Margaret abandonó su labor y los miró con aire ausente.

—¿De qué se trata? —preguntó.

—Tom quiere saber si el niño ya es lo bastante mayor como para jugar con el heno.

—No tengo la menor idea —contestó Margaret y volvió a tomar la labor.

—Mira, Tom, el niño no puede sostenerse en pie; no debe ponerse boca abajo, ni acostarse de modo que la cabeza le cuelgue, no hay que tocarle ni hacerle cosquillas y no se le puede cortar en dos o tres trozos con la guadaña. ¿Tendrás cuidado de que esto no suceda?

Tom extendió los brazos.

—Este chico es un niñero estupendo —hijo notar Margaret.

—Le gusta mucho el niño, por eso es así —fue la respuesta de Helen—. Van a ser amigos de toda la vida.

—¿Empezando a las edades de seis y un años?

—Por supuesto. Será una gran cosa para Tom.

—Quizá sea una cosa mejor aún para el niño.

Habían pasado catorce meses, pero Margaret todavía estaba en Howards End. No se le había ocurrido un plan mejor. Había llegado una vez más el tiempo de la siega del heno, las grandes amapolas rojas se abrían de nuevo en el jardín. Julio vendría después con las pequeñas amapolas entre el trigo; agosto, con la siega del trigo. Estos pequeños acontecimientos se convertirían en parte de ella año tras año. Cada verano temería que el pozo se secase; cada invierno, que las cañerías se helaran; los vientos del oeste podían derribar el olmo y acabar con todo y por ello Margaret no podía leer o charlar cuando soplaba el viento del oeste. Por entonces, el aire estaba sereno. Margaret y su hermana estaban sentadas junto a los restos del banco de piedra de Evie, donde el césped se confundía con el prado.

—¡Hay que ver cuánto tiempo llevan! —dijo Helen—. ¿Qué estarán haciendo ahí dentro?

Margaret, que cada vez era menos habladora, no contestó. El ruido de la segadora llegaba con intermitencias, como el ruido de las olas cuando rompen. Junto a ellas, un hombre estaba preparándose para segar uno de los huecos del valle.

—Ojalá Henry pudiera salir para disfrutar de este espectáculo —dijo Helen—. ¡Estar encerrado en casa con un tiempo tan espléndido! Es un suplicio.

—Así tiene que ser —dijo Margaret—. La fiebre del heno es su principal objeción a vivir en el campo, pero cree que vale la pena, a pesar de todo.

—Meg, ¿está enfermo o no? Nunca he podido averiguarlo.

—No está enfermo. Sólo eternamente cansado. Ha trabajado con dureza toda su vida. Ésas son las personas que se derrumban cuando comprenden una cosa.

—Supongo que le angustia enormemente su participación en todo el desorden.

—Enormemente. Por eso desearía que hoy no hubiera venido Dolly. Pero él quería que vinieran todos. Así tenía que ser.

—¿Para qué los quiere?

Margaret no respondió.

—¿Puedo decirte una cosa, Meg? Me gusta Henry.

—Sería extraño que no te gustara —dijo Margaret.

—No solía pensar así.

—¡No solías! —bajó los ojos un instante hacia los oscuros abismos del pasado. Todos los habían sobrepasado, excepto Leonard y Charles. Estaban edificando una nueva vida, oscura pero resplandeciente de tranquilidad. Leonard había muerto, y a Charles le quedaban aún dos años de cárcel por cumplir. Antes no solían ver claro, ahora todo era distinto.

—Me gusta Henry porque se preocupa por las cosas.

—Y a él le gustas tú porque no te preocupas.

Helen suspiró. Parecía humillada y ocultó la cara entre las manos. Tras una pausa, dijo:

—A propósito del amor... —una transición menos abrupta de lo que pudiera parecer.

Margaret no había dejado de trabajar.

—Me refiero al amor de una mujer por un hombre. Antes yo creía que toda mi vida debía depender de eso e iba de un lado para otro como si algo anduviera mal dentro de mí. Pero ahora todo es paz; ya me he curado. Herr Förstmeister, de quien Frieda sigue escribiéndome, debe de ser un hombre muy noble de corazón, pero no se da cuenta de que no me casaré nunca con él ni con nadie. No es cuestión de vergüenza o de desconfianza por mi parte. Es que no podría, simplemente. Estoy acabada. Antes, cuando se trataba del amor de un hombre, era tan soñadora como una adolescente, y creía que para bien o para mal el amor debía ser lo más grande. Pero no lo ha sido; también el amor es un sueño. ¿No te parece?

—No, no estoy de acuerdo.

—Debería recordar a Leonard como mi amante —dijo Helen caminando por el prado—. Yo le tenté y le maté; es lo menos que puedo hacer. Me gustaría arrojar de todo mi corazón a Leonard en una tarde como esta. Pero no puedo. No sirve de nada fingir. Lo estoy olvidando —sus ojos se llenaron de lágrimas—. Nada parece ir acompasado... Dime... querida... —se interrumpió—. ¡Tommy!

—¿Sí?

—No intentes que el niño se sostenga sobre sus piernas... Siento que me falta algo. Veo cómo amas a Henry, como le comprendes cada día más y sé que la muerte no os separará al final. Pero yo... ¿Es un defecto criminal, espantoso?

Margaret la hizo callar.

—No, es sólo que las personas difieren más entre sí de lo que se pretende —dijo—. En todo el mundo los hombres y las mujeres se preocupan porque no pueden actuar como se supone que deben hacerlo. De vez en cuando lo confiesan y eso les alivia. No te preocupes, Helen. Actúa como eres; ama a tu hijo. A mí no me gustan los niños. Estoy contenta de no tener ninguno. Me gusta jugar con ellos porque son hermosos y encantadores. Pero eso es todo: nada auténtico, ni asomo de lo que debiera ser. Otros... otros van aún más lejos y se desentienden de la humanidad en peso. Un lugar, al igual que una persona, puede recoger el rayo. ¡No ves que todo tiende a aliviar, a fin de cuentas! Es parte de la batalla contra la mezquindad. Diferencias... eternas diferencias planeadas por Dios para una sola familia, para que siempre haya color; angustia, quizá, pero color en el día gris. No puedo consentir que te preocupes por Leonard. No insistas en el elemento personal cuando éste no surge. Olvida a Leonard.

—Sí, sí, pero ¿qué obtuvo Leonard de la vida?

—Quizá una aventura.

—¿Y eso es suficiente?

—Para nosotras, no. Para él, sí.

Helen tomó un puñado de hierba. Contempló la acedera y el trébol rojo, blanco y amarillo y la hierba temblorosa y las margaritas y los tallitos que lo componían. Lo acercó a la cara.

—¿Está ya dulce?

—No, sólo marchito.

—Estará dulce mañana.

Helen sonrió:

—Oh, Meg, tú sí que eres una persona —dijo—. Piensa en la agitación y en la tortura de hace un año por estas fechas. Hoy no

podría ser desgraciada aunque lo intentara. ¡Qué cambio! Y todo por ti.

—Bueno, simplemente nos hemos asentado. Henry y tú habéis aprendido a comprenderos el uno al otro y a perdonar a lo largo del otoño y del invierno.

—Sí, pero ¿quién nos hizo asentarnos?

Margaret no contestó. La guadaña había empezado y se ajustó sus quevedos para contemplarla.

—¡Fuiste tú! —exclamó Helen—. Tú lo hiciste todo, querida, aunque eres demasiado tonta para darte cuenta. Vivir aquí fue idea tuya: yo te quería, él te quería; todo el mundo decía que era imposible, pero tú sabías que no. Piensa en lo que habrían sido nuestras vidas sin ti, Meg... El niño y yo con Mónica, rebelde por principio; y Henry, pasando de mano en mano, de Evie a Dolly. Pero tú recogiste los trozos y nos hiciste un hogar. ¿No te das cuenta, aunque sea por un instante; de que tu vida ha sido heroica? ¿No recuerdas los dos meses que siguieron al arresto de Charles, cuando te pusiste manos a la obra y lo hiciste todo?

—En aquel momento los dos estabais enfermos —dijo Margaret —. Yo hice lo que era evidente. Tenía que curar a dos enfermos. Aquí había una casa amueblada y vacía. Era evidente. Yo misma no sabía que se convertiría en un hogar definitivo. Sin duda he hecho algo para desenredar el embrollo, pero cosas que no se pueden explicar me han ayudado.

—Espero que sea definitivo —dijo Helen desviándose hacia otros pensamientos.

—Eso creo. Hay momentos en que siento que Howards End es particularmente nuestro.

—En cualquier caso, Londres se acerca.

Señaló al otro extremo del prado, al otro extremo de ocho o nueve prados, al final de los cuales se percibía un polvo rojo.

—Eso ya se ve en Surrey e incluso en Hampshire ahora —continuó—. Lo veo desde los Downs de Purbeck. Y Londres es sólo parte de algo más, me temo. La vida va a verse muy revuelta en todo el mundo.

Margaret sabía que su hermana estaba en lo cierto. Howards End, Oniton, los Downs de Purbeck, el Oderberge, eran supervivientes, y el horno estaba a punto para ellos. Lógicamente, no tenían derecho a vivir. La única esperanza era la debilidad de la lógica. ¿Era el triunfo de la tierra sobre el tiempo?

—Porque una cosa ocurra ahora inexorablemente, no tiene por qué ocurrir siempre inexorablemente —dijo Margaret—. Esta locura por el movimiento sólo se ha puesto en marcha en los últimos cien años. Quizá la siga una civilización que no engendre el movimiento, que descanse en la tierra. Todos los signos parecen contradecirme por ahora, pero no puedo evitar la esperanza y de madrugada, en el jardín, siento que nuestra casa es el futuro al mismo tiempo que el pasado.

Se volvieron y contemplaron la casa. Sus propios recuerdos la coloreaban ahora. Porque el niño de Helen había nacido en la habitación del centro. Margaret dijo:

—Oh, ten cuidado —porque algo se movía tras la ventana del vestíbulo y la puerta se abrió.

—El cónclave se termina por fin. Iré a ver.

Era Paul.

Helen se retiró con el niño prado adentro. Voces amigas la saludaron. Margaret se levantó para salir al encuentro de un hombre que llevaba un espeso bigote negro.

—Mi padre pregunta por usted —dijo el hombre con hostilidad.

Margaret tomó su labor y le siguió.

—Hemos estado hablando de negocios —continuó él—, pero supongo que usted ya estaba al corriente de todo.

—Sí, en efecto.

Torpe de movimiento —porque había pasado toda su vida en la silla de montar—, Paul golpeó con el pie la pintura de la puerta de entrada. Mistress Wilcox dio un gritito de alarma. No le gustaba que desportillasen la pintura; se detuvo en el vestíbulo para retirar el boa y los guantes de Dolly de un jarrón.

Su marido estaba apoltronado en un gran sillón de cuero en el comedor y a su lado, sosteniendo su mano con ostentación, estaba

Evie. Dolly, vestida de púrpura, se sentaba cerca de la ventana. La habitación estaba un poco oscura y cargada, sin aire; se veían obligados a conservarla así hasta que el heno estuviera cortado. Margaret se unió a la familia sin hablar; los cinco se habían reunido a la hora del té y Margaret sabía lo que iban a decir. Enemiga de perder el tiempo, continuó cosiendo. El reloj dio las seis.

—¿Todo el mundo está conforme? —dijo Henry con voz cansada. Usaba viejas frases, pero su efecto era inesperado y triste—. Porque no quiero que volváis por aquí más tarde quejándoos de que he sido injusto.

—Aparentemente, todos estamos conformes —dijo Paul.

—Perdona, hijo mío. Sólo tienes que decirlo y te dejaré la casa a ti.

Paul mostró ceño malhumorado y empezó a rascarse el brazo.

—Puesto que he abandonado la vida que me gustaba, al aire libre, y he vuelto a casa para hacerme cargo de los negocios, no tiene sentido que me instale aquí —dijo por fin—. Ni es el campo ni es la ciudad.

—Muy bien. ¿Estás de acuerdo con mis arreglos, Evie?

—Desde luego, padre.

—¿Y tú, Dolly?

Dolly levantó su carita marchita que la pena había hecho empalidecer sin dar firmeza a los rasgos.

—Me parece perfectamente espléndido —dijo—. Yo pensaba que Charles quería la casa para los niños, pero la última vez que le vi me dijo que no, que ya no podremos vivir en esta parte de Inglaterra. Charles dice que tendremos que cambiarnos el nombre, pero yo no veo por qué. Wilcox nos sienta bien a Charles y a mí, y no puedo pensar en ningún otro nombre.

Hubo un silencio general. Dolly miró en torno suyo nerviosa, temiendo haber cometido alguna incorrección. Paul continuó rascándose el brazo.

—En tal caso, dejo la casa de Howards End a mi esposa —dijo Henry—. Que todo el mundo lo entienda y que nadie, después de mi muerte, sienta resquemores ni sorpresas.

Margaret no contestó. Había algo misterioso en su triunfo. Ella, que jamás esperó conquistar nada, había entrado a saco entre los Wilcox y había roto sus vidas.

—En consecuencia, no dejo a mi esposa ningún dinero —dijo Henry—. Tal es su deseo. Todo lo que le habría correspondido será dividido entre vosotros. Ya os estoy dando mucho en vida para que podáis ser independientes. Ése es también deseo suyo. También ella cede gran parte de su dinero. Tiene la intención de dividir su renta por la mitad en los próximos diez años y piensa dejar la casa, a su muerte, a su... a su sobrino, que está ahí, en el prado. ¿Queda claro? ¿Todo el mundo lo entiende?

Paul se puso en pie. Estaba acostumbrado a los nativos y a la menor ocasión le salía el inglés que llevaba dentro. Sintiéndose masculino y cínico dijo:

—¿En el prado? ¡Ah, vamos! Yo creí que nos íbamos a quedar con todo, incluidos los negritos.

Mistress Cahill murmuró:

—Calla, Paul, prometiste tener cuidado.

Sintiéndose mujer de mundo, se levantó y se dispuso a partir. Su padre le dio un beso.

—Adiós, hija mía —dijo—. Y no te preocupes por mí.

—Adiós, padre.

Le llegó el turno a Dolly. Ansiosa de contribuir, se rió nerviosamente y dijo:

—Adiós, míster Wilcox. Resulta curioso que mistress Wilcox le hubiese dejado Howards End a Margaret y que ésta lo haya obtenido después de todo.

Se oyó un bufido procedente de Evie.

—Adiós —dijo Margaret y le dio un beso.

Una y otra vez cayó la palabra, como el oleaje de un mar en retirada.

—Adiós.

—Adiós, Dolly.

—Hasta pronto, padre.

—Adiós, hijo mío; sé siempre prudente.

—Adiós, mistress Wilcox.

—Adiós.

Margaret acompañó a los visitantes hasta la verja de entrada. Luego volvió junto a su marido y apoyó la cabeza en las manos de éste. Henry estaba lastimosamente cansado. Pero la observación de Dolly había despertado el interés de Margaret.

—¿Podrías contarme, Henry, qué es eso de que mistress Wilcox me había dejado Howards End?

—Sí, eso hizo —respondió él tranquilamente—. Pero ésa es una vieja historia. Cuando estuvo enferma y tú fuiste tan amable con ella, quiso darte algo a cambio y, estando como estaba fuera de sí, garrapateó «Howards End» en un trozo de papel. Yo lo estuve pensando muy seriamente y, como era una cosa de mero capricho, lo dejé correr sin saber lo que sería para mí mi Margaret en el futuro.

Margaret guardó silencio. Algo agitó su ser en lo más hondo y le recorrió un escalofrío.

—No creerás que hice mal, ¿verdad? —preguntó él.

—No, cariño. No se ha hecho nada mal.

Del jardín llegó una risa. «¡Ya están aquí, por fin!», exclamó Henry desenredándose de su esposa con una sonrisa. Helen entró en la penumbra sosteniendo a Tom con una mano y llevando a su hijo en la otra. Hubo gritos de alegría contagiosa.

—¡El campo ya está segado! —gritó Helen con excitación—... el prado grande también. Lo hemos estado viendo hasta el final ¡y habrá una cosecha de heno como nunca la ha habido!

Weybridge, 1908-1910.

Gracias por el escaneo y corrección del doc original

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Notas

[1] Una empresa transportista de Londres. *(N. del t.)*

[2] Literalmente, *Decreto sobre la hermana de la esposa difunta*, disposición legal por la que se autorizaba al viudo a contraer matrimonio con la hermana de su difunta esposa. *(N. del t.)*

[3] El West (el Oeste) era el barrio aristocrático de Londres. *(Nota del traductor.)*

[4] *The native hue of resolution: Hamlet*, acto II, escena I. *(Nota del traductor.)*

[5] *The pale cast of thought: ibídem. (N. del t.)*

[6] En Inglaterra las viviendas se arriendan por un periodo de tiempo determinado, al término del cual el propietario queda en libertad para renovar o no el contrato. *(N. del t.)*

[7] Novela de George Meredith. *(N. del t.)*

[8] Roben Louis Stevenson. *(N. del t.)*

[9] Chelsea era (y lo es aún) el barrio de los artistas. *(N. del t.)*

[10] Personajes tradicionales del teatro de polichinelas inglés. *(Nota del traductor.)*

[11] Sociedad del Caucho del África Occidental Imperial.

[12] En el original: Howards End-Howards End. El diálogo, es un juego de palabras en torno al vocablo *end* (fondo, confín, rincón, muerte, final y acabar). *(N. del t.)*

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